ANC

Giant western

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW
COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

FEB.
25¢

FEATURING

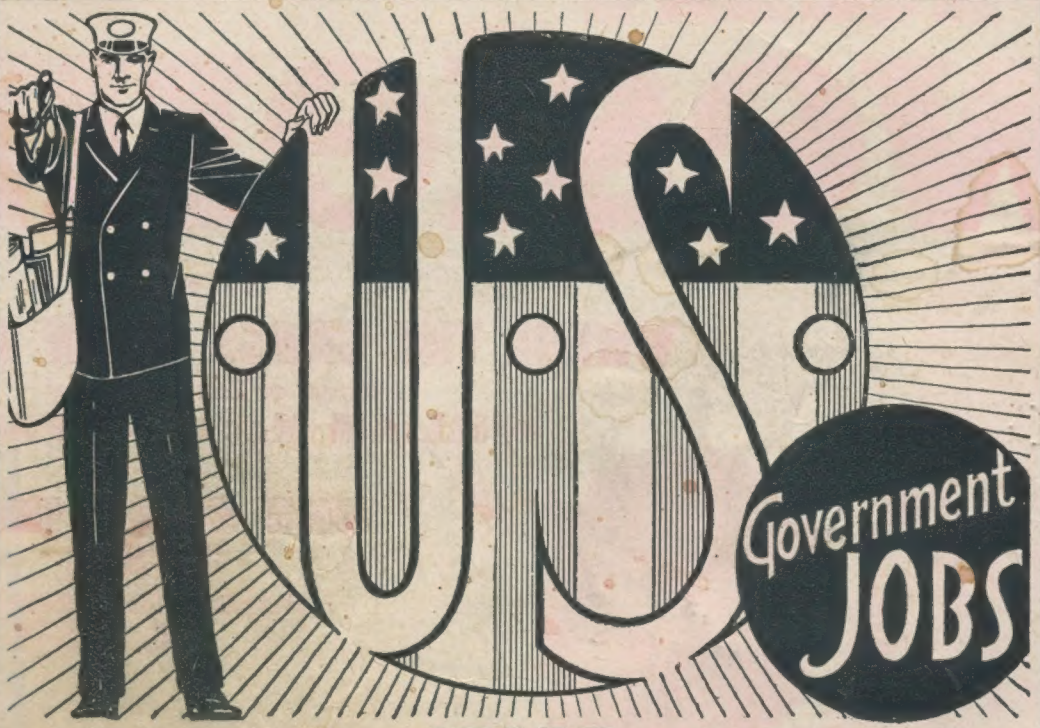
WHERE THE GRASS GREW RED

A Novel of Range War by
WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

THE SLICK IRON TRAIL

A Jacob Green Novelet by
A. LESLIE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



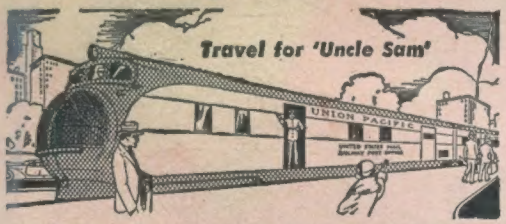
START
As High As $3,450.00 a Year

Get Ready NOW for 1951 Examinations
Veterans Get Special Preference

City Mail Carriers, City Post Office Clerk

Clerks and carriers now get $2,870.00 the first year regular and automatically increase $100 a year to $3,670.00. Open to men — women, 18 to 50.

Railway Postal Clerks



Railway Postal Clerks get $3,170.00 the first year regular, being paid on the first and fifteenth of each month. ($132.08 each pay day.) Their pay is automatically increased yearly to $3,670.00. Advance may be had to Chief Clerk at $5,970.00 a year. ($248.75 each pay day.) Open to male veterans only.

Port Patrol Officer

Salary $3,125.00 to start. Men 21 to 45. Work connected with examining baggage and merchandise entering the country from foreign parts. Veterans only.

OTHER GOVERNMENT JOBS

Many other dependable government jobs are obtained through Civil Service examinations. Positions such as Rural Mail Carrier — Sub-Clerical positions — Meat Inspector — Jr. Professional Assistant — Patrol Inspector — Storekeeper Gauger — Stenographer — Typist, Messenger, etc.

Get Ready At Once

Experience is often unnecessary. Let us show you how to get a government job.

Free List of Positions

Fill out the following coupon. Tear it off and mail it today — now, at once. Although not Government sponsored this may result in your getting a big-paid government job.

★

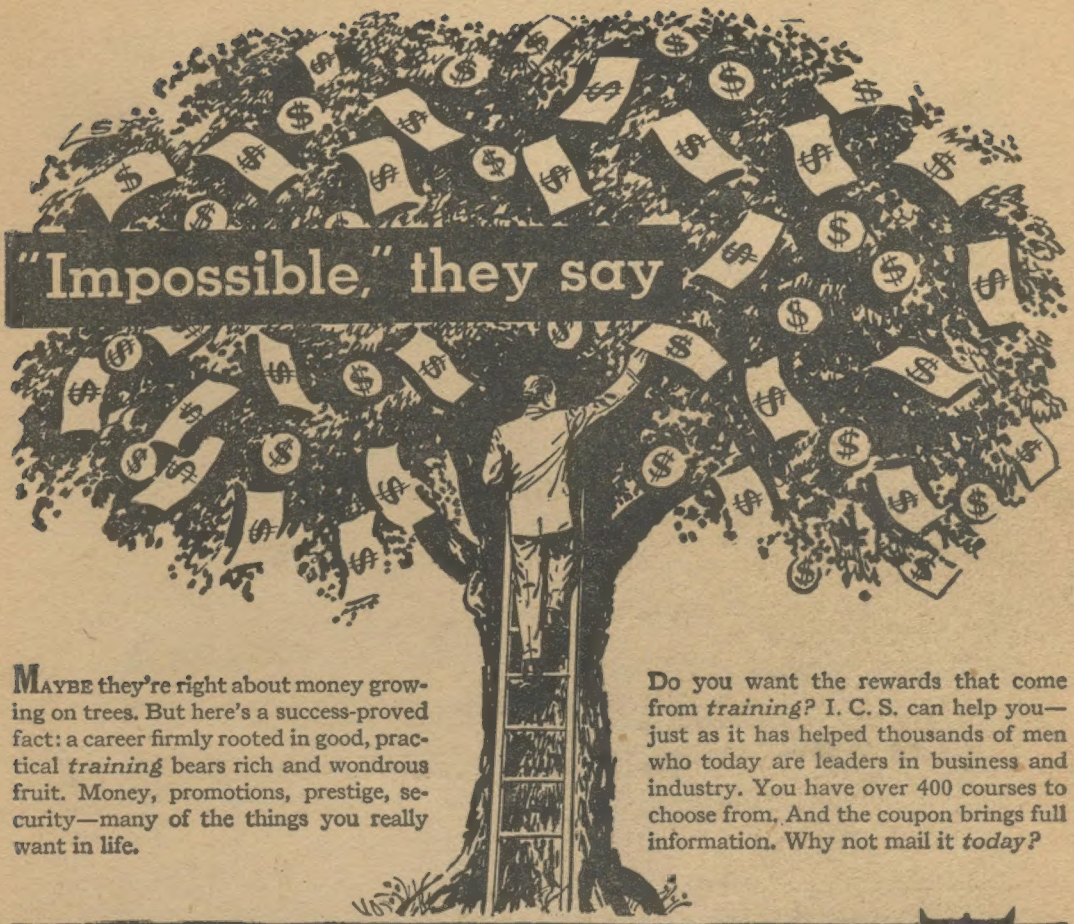
FRANKLIN INSTITUTE, Dept. M-94, Rochester 4, N. Y.
Gentlemen: Rush to me, FREE of charge, list of U. S. Government big pay jobs. Send me FREE 40-page book describing salaries, vacations, hours, work, and full particulars, telling how to qualify for one of these jobs.

Name.....

Street.....

City.....

★



"Impossible," they say

MAYBE they're right about money growing on trees. But here's a success-proved fact: a career firmly rooted in good, practical *training* bears rich and wondrous fruit. Money, promotions, prestige, security—many of the things you really want in life.

Do you want the rewards that come from *training*? I. C. S. can help you—just as it has helped thousands of men who today are leaders in business and industry. You have over 400 courses to choose from. And the coupon brings full information. Why not mail it *today*?

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

APPROVED under the G.I. BILL

BOX 3966-U, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ App. Psychology ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Bus. Correspondence ☐ Bus. Law
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics ☐ Illustration
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Motor Traffic ☐ Postal Civil Service
- ☐ Retailing ☐ Retail Bus. Management
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Traffic Management

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemical Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architecture ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Prac. FM and Television
- ☐ Prac. Telephony ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio, General ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Power House Electric
- ☐ Ship Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Pattermaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Ship Fitting ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking ☐ Welding Engineering
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Locomotive Machinist
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman
- ☐ Steam and Diesel Loco. Eng.

Stationary Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combus. Engrg. ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Power Plant Engr. ☐ Steam Engineer

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing ☐ Loom Fixing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Present Position_____ Employed by_____

Length of Service in World War II_____

Enrollment under G.I. Bill approved for World War II Veterans. Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces.

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

Giant western

VOL. 7, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION FEBRUARY, 1951

A Full-Length Novel

WHERE THE GRASS GREW RED . . WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE 9
Randy Sloan grimly fights for survival when the ancient family feud between the Sloans and the Cottrells breaks out again in a flaming holocaust of hate which brings death and disaster to the rangeland!

Two Complete Novelets

THE SLICK-IRON TRAIL . . . . . A. LESLIE 74
A quotation from the Book of Judges gives Jacob Green the clue that he needs in order to smash a treacherous ring of scheming killers!

THE BADMAN . . . . . T. C. McCLARY 108
The kid was dazzled by the friendship of the gun king—but he saw only the glitter of fame, not the ruthless nature that lay beneath!

Short Stories

CLOSE SHAVE FOR THE BARBER . . TEX GAINSVILLE 69
Bob Hunter proves that his wits can be quite as keen as his razors

BRONC BLOOD . . . . . LESLIE ERNENWEIN 92
Things looked black for happy-go-lucky Frank Benton of the Rafter B

THE REEL STUFF . . . . . B. M. BOWER 100
Lights, camera, action—it's a Flying U production, all-star cast!

FOUR CARD DRAW . . . . . JIM MAYO 124
Allen Ring knew the dead man's records could create range conflict

Features

THE TALLY BOOK . . . . . THE RAMROD 6
Where all hands get together to ride herd on a gala fiction roundup

E'TOWN'S GOLDEN DAZE . . VEDA NEVILLE CONNER 97
Looking for a fortune? There's still gold in those New Mexico hills

See Page 6 for list of other special fact features in this issue!

GIANT WESTERN. Published every other month and copyright 1950 by Best Publications, Inc., 29 Worthington St., Springfield 3, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Subscriptions: (12 issues), $3.00; single copies, $.25; foreign postage extra. Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Springfield, Mass., March 7, 1949, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Material is submitted at risk of the sender and must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All characters in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

You Practice COMMUNICATIONS

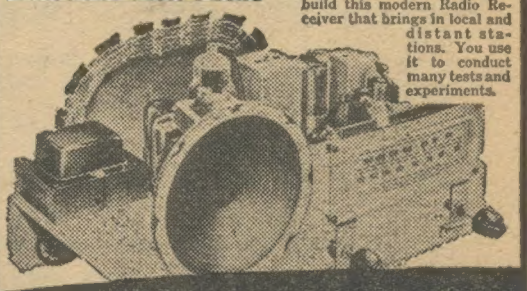
I Send You Parts To Build This Equipment

As part of my new Communications Course I send you parts to build your own transmitter. Conduct actual procedure demanded of Broadcast Station Operators, make experiments, learn how to put a transmitter on the air.

You Practice Radio SERVICING

On This Modern Radio You Build With Parts I Send

As part of my Servicing Course, I send you the speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, loop antenna, EVERYTHING you need to build this modern Radio Receiver that brings in local and distant stations. You use it to conduct many tests and experiments.



BE A RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIAN

Learn Servicing or Communications by Practicing in Spare Time with MANY KITS OF PARTS I Send

YOU BUILD this tester as part of my Servicing Course. It soon helps you earn $5, $10 and more a week EXTRA MONEY fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning.

YOU BUILD this Power Pack as part of my new Communications Course. Use it to conduct fascinating experiments with frequency amplifiers, multipliers, buffer stages, etc.

YOU BUILD this Superheterodyne Receiver Circuit and conduct Frequency Modulation experiments and many other tests as part of my Servicing Course.

YOU BUILD this Signal Generator as part of my Servicing Course for more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many interesting tests and experiments.

VETERANS

GET THIS TRAINING WITHOUT COST UNDER G. I. BILL

MAIL COUPON

YOU BUILD this Wavemeter as part of my new Communications Course. Use it with Oscillator you also build that furnishes basic power to transmitter and determines transmitter frequency.

J. E. SMITH, Pres.
National Radio Institute

Do you want a good-pay job in the fast growing RADIO-TELEVISION Industry? Or do you want to have your own money-making Radio-Television Shop? Here is your opportunity. I've trained hundreds of men to be successful Technicians . . . MEN WITH NO PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE. My tested and proved train-at-home method makes learning easy. You learn Radio-Television principles from my illustrated lessons. You get practical experience building, testing and experimenting with parts I send. All equipment yours to keep.

Make Extra Money In Spare Time

The day you enroll, I start sending you SPECIAL BOOKLETS that show you how to make $5, $10 a week or more EXTRA MONEY fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. From here, it's a short step to your own shop or a good-pay Radio-Television servicing job. Or be a licensed Radio-Television Operator or Technician. In 1945, there were 943 Radio Stations. Today about 2700 are on the air! RESULT—THOUSANDS OF QUALIFIED MEN STEPPED INTO GOOD JOBS. Another example—only 19 Television stations were on the air in 1947. Today, more than fifty. Within a few months, 150, say the experts—and 1000 within three years. Then add developments in FM, Two Way Radio, Police, Marine, Aviation, Microwave Relay Radio. Think what this means! New jobs, more jobs for qualified men.

Mail Coupon For Books Free

Act now! Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Coupon entitles you to actual lesson, "GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH RECEIVER SERVICING." It shows how many pictures and diagrams are used to make learning at home easier, practical. You also get my 64-page book, "HOW TO BE A SUCCESS IN RADIO-TELEVISION." It tells more about YOUR opportunities . . . details of my Course . . . what my graduates are doing and earning . . . how quickly you can be on your way to good pay, success, a bright future. Send coupon in envelope or paste on penny postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1BQ, National Radio Institute, Pioneer Home Study Radio School, Washington 9, D. C.

I TRAINED THESE MEN AT HOME

"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. Am now Chief Engineer, WOOK." —T. S. Norton, Hamilton, O.

"I received my 2nd Class Radiotelegraph License and worked on ships. Now with Station WEAN as control operator." —R. Arnold, Rumford, R. I.

"Today I am considered an expert Radio - Television Technician. Have 4 employees. Radio repair business has doubled." —P. G. Miller, Toledo, Ohio.

"N. R. I. has been my stepping stone from a few hundred dollars to over $4,000 a year as a Radio Engineer." —A. E. Michaels, Trenton, Georgia.

"Two months after starting, took a part-time job. Now working full time. Make $200 a month plus commission on Servicing." —Ira McNiel, Rockdale, Texas.

"While learning, made $5, $10 a week in spare time. Now have spare-time shop at home and earn up to $25 a week." —Lavender Arnold, Pontiac, Michigan.

MAIL COUPON! FIND OUT ABOUT THIS TESTED WAY TO BETTER PAY

Good for Both—FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1BQ
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book about How to Win Success in Radio-Television —both FREE. (No Salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

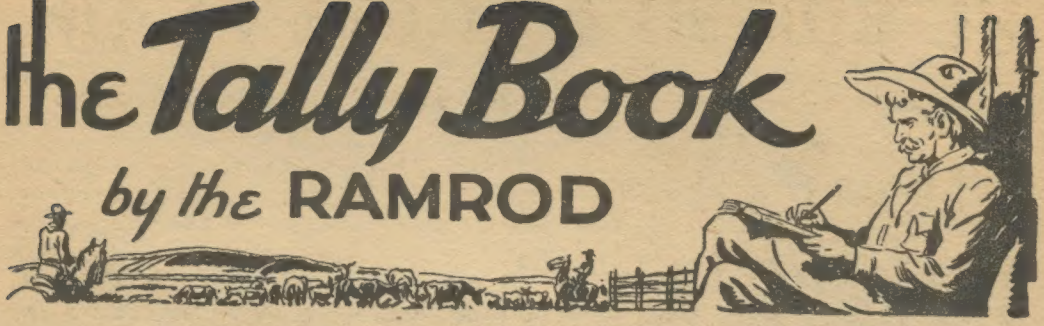
Name_____ Age_____

Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____

☐ Check if Veteran Approved for training under G. I. Bill

The Tally Book by the RAMROD



A DEPARTMENT WHERE ALL HANDS GET TOGETHER TO RIDE HERD ON THE WESTERN FICTION ROUNDUP

THERE are stories and stories. Some'll do to while away an idle hour and to be forgotten almost immediately. They provide entertainment, kind of frothy, not meant to do any more. And then sometimes there are heavier kinds of fiction, like a lot of these historical novels which got popular with "Anthony Adverse" back aways, which aim to slip a chunk of history under the reader's unsuspecting belt. Some of these are light on history and long on story, some others are so heavy on history and thin on story that they're a right smart chore to read.

Then there's another kind of story. The author doesn't start out with an axe to grind. He doesn't say to himself about his readers, "You jugheads, I'm gonna cram a little education down your throats if it kills you," and then give out with three hundred pages about the political situation in Podunk County, Iowa, during the second Presidential term of Ulysses S. Grant.

This is the kind of literature guaranteed to put readers to sleep and is fine if you suffer from insomnia. But every once in a while a writer happens across a period in history that is teeming and bursting with life and color and action. It's got so many stories that they're popping all over the place.

Such a period was our American Revolution in 1776, and the Napoleonic era

(Continued on page 137)

Special Fact Features in this Issue of GIANT WESTERN

BUFFALO MEAT
Once a favorite dish
SAM BRANT 106

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ
Test your Western knowledge
ILLUSTRATION 107

A BOOK BARGAIN ROUNDUP
Guide to the best Westerns
TEX MUMFORD 123

INDIAN COSTUMES
They often made trouble
SIMPSON M. RITTER 136

HOLD ON TO YOUR SCALP
Ever play "Stickball"?
WILLIAM CARTER 139

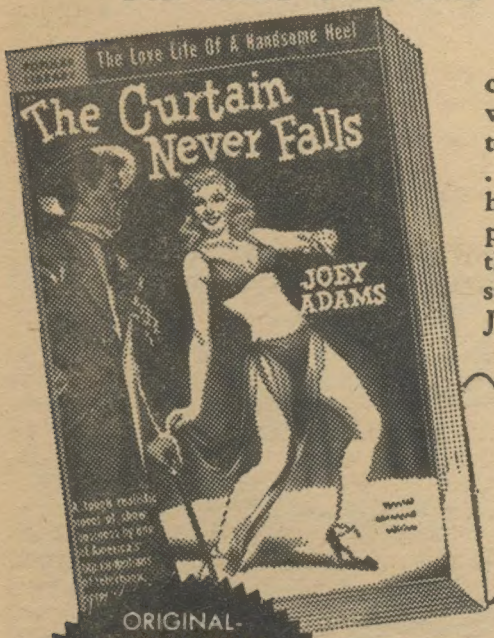
LADY BUFFALO HUNTER
A story of Kansas
MARK KNIGHT 141

GOLD RUSH LAW
Frisco's boom time justice
JOHN BLACK 143

WOMEN IN RODEO
Risks are out for ladies
BESS RITTER 145

HE RUINED A WOMAN'S LIFE!

DID FAME GIVE HIM THE RIGHT TO DO THIS?



We all know characters like Jackie, the comedian . . . ruthless, ambitious, not caring whom he steps on — just so he comes out on top. Love to Jackie was just lust and passion . . . and he never even waited long enough to hear the broken hearts crack. No punches are pulled in this fast-paced story about Jackie, the man who's on-stage all the time — and upstage at that! Don't miss finding out why, for Jackie, the curtain never falls!

"THE CURTAIN NEVER FALLS"

WRITTEN BY JOEY ADAMS

AMERICA'S TOP RADIO AND T.V. COMEDIAN!

ORIGINAL-EDITION PRICE from $2.00 to $3.00

POPULAR LIBRARY

REPRINT PRICE

25¢

ANY BEST-SELLING REPRINT ON THIS PAGE ONLY 25¢ EACH

ORIGINALLY SOLD FOR AS MUCH AS $3.00 PER BOOK

LAURA
by Vera Caspary
The same mystery that made the thrilling movie! What drew men to Laura? And who wanted to kill her?

THE TWO WORLDS OF JOHNNY TRURO
by George Sklar
They called her a tramp, but Helen was life itself to Johnny. Was she worth it?

THE HERO
by Millard Lampell
Steve was a hero on the football field, but got kicked around plenty in the game of love!

THAT'S MY BABY
pictures by Josef A. Schneider
A Popular Library original! Baby photos with hilarious comments and loads of belly laughs!

Popular Library, Inc., Dept. TF-2
10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y.

Please send me postpaid the Popular Library Books I have checked. I enclose 25c (in coin or in U. S. stamps of small denominations) per copy. (We pay postage for orders of four books or more. If ordering less than four books, please enclose 5c per book extra for postage.)

- ☐ THE CURTAIN NEVER FALLS by Joey Adams
- ☐ LAURA by Vera Caspary
- ☐ THAT'S MY BABY Photos by Josef A. Schneider
- ☐ THE TWO WORLDS OF JOHNNY TRURO by George Sklar
- ☐ THE HERO by Millard Lampell

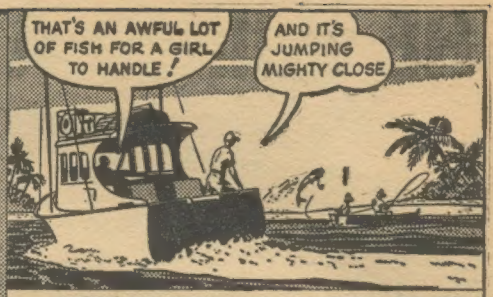
NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

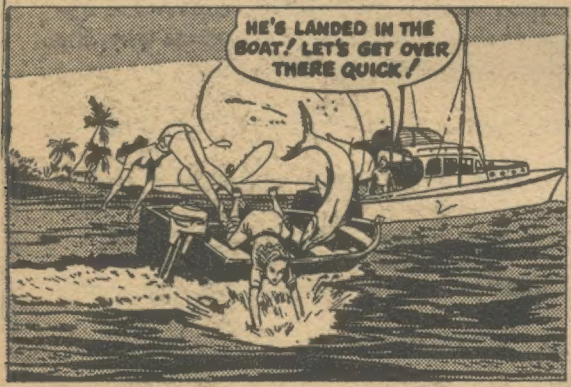
CITY & ZONE_____ STATE_____

CUT OUT COUPON . . . MAIL TODAY

LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN • • •



PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"
WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA

SAY, THIS BLADE'S A MONEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE
LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN

THIN GILLETTES GIVE THE BEST-LOOKING, MOST COMFORTABLE SHAVES YOU EVER HAD WITH A LOW-PRICE BLADE. UNIFORMLY KEEN AND LONG LASTING, THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T" AND PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

A NOVEL

BY WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

I

THE day was pleasantly warm and the spring sun wrapped Round Top in an atmosphere peaceful as a New England sabbath. It was near the noon hour with nobody stirring. The only sound that broke the quiet was the bawling of fretted cattle in the stock pens at the edge of town.

Randolph Sloan rode down Main Street toward the court house square,

WHERE THE GRASS GREW RED

Randy Sloan grimly fights for survival when an ancient family grudge breaks out again in a flaming holocaust of hate which brings death and disaster!

his horse's hoofs flinging up at each step a spurt of dust. He sat the saddle with negligent ease, no sign in his bearing of the inner tenseness that tightened him. This town was enemy territory. He had not been here since that day six years ago when hell had broken loose and death had sent leaden messengers across the square in yellow flashes. The sight of the place brought back harrowing memories.

Eight of the Sloan faction in the feud had ridden in on an invitation from Anse Cottrell to talk peace. When they drew up to dismount, the guns of the ambushers had blasted them. The first burst of fire had emptied three saddles. After a few sporadic shots the Sloans fled, two of them badly wounded. One of these was Randolph's father, the leader of the clan. He died a week later. In the battle the Cottrells had lost only one of their warriors. Though they did not know it, he had been killed by young Randolph, the fifteen-year-old boy who had been riding beside his father.

The carnage of that day broke the back of the Sloan resistance. The leadership fell on young Sumner Sloan, a brother of Randolph, and before he could make a move he had been arrested on a framed murder charge, tried, convicted, and sentenced to fifteen years in the penitentiary.

Randolph tied his horse at the rail in front of Stump's New York Emporium. That he was not welcome in Round Top he knew, but it was not likely that anybody would force a quarrel. Though hatred remained, the days of violent action were past. Orders had come from Old Anse to his followers not to start a difficulty. He was on top and he did not want any disturbance that might stir up public opinion against him.

A bareheaded young woman came out of the little shop next door to Stump's place and cut some nasturtiums. The rays of the sun slanted over Jim Wong's restaurant and spotlighted the bronze hair drawn severely to a knot back of her neck. She had a tall slim figure and when for a moment her deepset eyes rested on Sloan he saw they were clouded with a sullen resentment. The world just now did not please her.

The young woman held his mind only fleetingly, for his gaze had fallen on a sorrel horse at the rack carrying the Circle D brand. Dan Duff was in town. If they should meet, it might involve trouble. The fellow had been the chief witness against Sumner. He was a turbulent bully ready to fight without provocation. If Randolph had still been in the saddle he would have ridden on to Sanson's wagon-yard, but it was too late now. Young Bill Cottrell had come out of the store and was leaning against the doorjamb. It would not do to let Bill know he felt any fear.

A FLASH of surprise showed in Cottrell's eyes, but his voice gave no evidence of hostility. "'Lo, Randy, how's everything at Bigg's Bend?" he asked.

"Same as usual," Sloan answered quietly. "Nothing ever happens there."

As small boys the two had gone to the same country school, but after the feud started they had only a shooting acquaintance. For years they had not seen each other.

Sloan walked past him into the store. A big man, bull-necked and muscle bound, was at the counter buying a plug of tobacco. He glanced up and stiffened, the shallow stony eyes in his ugly lupine face fastened on Randolph. No coat covered his thick body. Beneath the open shirt a tangle of matted hair showed.

"Who said you might come to this town?" he demanded.

The stomach muscles of Sloan tightened. Before he answered he had to beat down the flame of rage that choked him. Toward this man he felt a deep hatred. Not only had he lied Sumner into prison; common report had it that he had shot down from ambush their uncle Tracy Sloan. But Randolph had strong reasons for not reviving dor-

mant warfare. He was pulling all the strings he could to get his brother pardoned and there would be no chance of success if active trouble flared again.

"I hope you don't mind, Mr. Duff," he said evenly. "I'm here on business and only for a short visit."

"Nobody minds," Cottrell cut in quickly. "There's no deadline against

RANDY SLOAN

you. Everything is quiet on the Potomac these days."

"That's fine," Sloan said.

"See that you make your visit damn short," Duff growled, remembering orders from above, to curb his hair-trigger temper.

Sloan moved past the big ruffian to talk with Asa Stump. The storekeeper had a ranch near town and wanted to buy a bull from the Bigg's Bend outfit. They discussed the matter and agreed on a price.

Duff flatfooted to the doorway and waited there.

"Dad is expecting us," Cottrell suggested. He was a dark well-built young fellow with plenty of good looks. "Don't start anything, Dan."

"Do him good to expect a while," Duff jeered. "Anse ain't God almighty." He was simmering with anger. "And don't tell me what to do."

The man's huge body filled the doorway.

"If I might pass," Sloan suggested.

Duff did not move. The young man brushed through the small space left.

"You can't push me around," Duff cried. "I've a mind to beat your head off."

Randolph's self-control slipped a notch. He gave the bad man a white-toothed mocking smile and drawled, "Sorry you got in my way."

Duff jumped for him fast. His great hard fist lashed out and caught the young man on the chin. Randolph went down like a ninepin. The shock of the blow stunned him. Duff kicked him savagely in the ribs while Cottrell tried to drag him away. A young woman flew down the garden path from the shop, in her hands a pair of scissors and a shirt waist she had been making. As the heavy boot thudded again and again against the body of the prostrate man she cried "Stop it, you brute!" Duff did not see or hear her. His whole attention was absorbed in his tigerish attempt to destroy this enemy.

Cottrell slid his arm under the fellow's chin and heaved backward. "You'll kill him, you fool," he warned.

Duff struggled to free himself. His huge arm swung in a half circle and flung the other aside. To his surprise Nora Hamilton confronted him. "Out of my way," he ordered, and plunged forward.

She raised her arm sharply to protect herself and the man's rush drove the scissors deep into his shoulder. A spurt of blood stained the cotton shirt. He let out a roar of rage and pain. Before he could move, Bill Cottrell had slammed the barrel of a .45 against the side of his head, and he went down like a log.

"What have I done?" Nora cried, fear in her eyes.

"Saved a man's life probably," Cot-

Sumner Sloan came to the edge of the roof and called out: "You crazy fools, a dozen rifles are covering you!" (Chap. XI)

trell answered. "Dan had gone crazy." He stooped and drew the revolver from the pocket in the big man's chaps. "When he gets mad, he hasn't the sense of a jackrabbit."

Sloan tried to rise and could not make it. Bill gave him a hand up. He swayed unsteadily on his feet.

"I'm a little shaky yet," he said, and added with a thin smile, "Kindness of the Cottrells."

Bill flushed angrily. "We hadn't a thing to do with this. We are not responsible for this maniac."

MISS HAMILTON suggested that Sloan had better come into the shop and rest for a few minutes. The ranchman's eyes swept up her long slender body to a face of fine bone structure without any warmth of life. The offer had been made reluctantly but he accepted it.

"Why not?" he replied. "It will give me a chance to thank you."

"For nothing," she told him coldly. "He ran on the scissors himself."

"Better get into the house," Cottrell said. "Dan is coming to and he'll be sore as a wounded bear with cubs."

"Get him away from here," Sloan answered curtly.

The shop was set back from the line of ugly false-fronted stores on the square. On either side of the path were

cultivated beds of roses, jonquils, and pansies. A trellis covered by a morning glory vine protected the porch from the summer sun. The editor of the *Round Top News* had once in a poetic mood dubbed this the Store Beautiful. That was before the rumor had spread that Nora Hamilton had moved here to escape from a doubtful past.

Every step Randolph Sloan took sent pains shooting through his battered body. When they reached the shop, Nora pushed a chair toward him. "Sit down."

"After you," he said.

She turned on him bluntly. "This is not a social call, sir. I do not know you, nor do I want to. I do not care to know drunken brawlers."

"That is short if not sweet. But you can't save a man's life and not let him thank you."

"I explained that. It was because I thought he was going to hit me that I raised the scissors."

"Was that why you ran down the path to interfere?" he asked, smiling at her.

"If he had been kicking a dog I would have gone just the same." There was an edge to her voice. She did not like his assurance.

Clearly she wanted him to understand that there was no tie between them, that what she had done could be rubbed off the slate. He thought of one reason why this might be. "Are you a friend of the Cottrells?" he inquired.

"I am a friend of nobody in this town," she said bleakly, and her lips became a thin line across her face.

The room was both a store for women and a dressmaker's shop. There were dress goods, hats, sewing supplies, sheets, and towels, and there was a dummy with a partially made frock draping it. His gaze took this in.

"Can you do business without making friends?" He put the question lightly.

"That is *my* affair."

"And not mine. You are quite right."

He caught at the arm of the chair to steady himself. His body swayed. She moved toward him to put an arm around him. He sank into the chair and grinned up. "May I say thanks this time?" he wanted to know.

Angry color swept into her face. The suspicion was in her mind that he had tricked her.

He went on without waiting for an answer. "We have one thing in common. This town is full of my enemies. You saw what just took place."

"Are you one of the Sloans?"

"I am Randolph Sloan. Three of my kin were killed within a hundred feet of here."

"Then why do you come back?"

"I have business here."

"More important business than staying alive?" she flung at him.

The woman stirred an interest in him. Though she was not pretty in the face, the head was beautifully modeled. In all her movements there was a supple grace. It was written on her that she had character. She could not be more than twenty-one or -two, but he would have hazarded a bet that she had never had much fun. The simplicity of her dress was almost austere. Life, he guessed, had mauled her a good deal.

"You have not lived here long," he said.

"No." She repented of the momentary concern she had shown for him. "Understand please that after you walk out of that door we shall not meet again."

He avoided facing that ultimatum directly. "Do you ever go to the schoolhouse dances?" he asked.

"No."

It registered with him that her tawny eyes, flecked with gold, would be lovely if they had warmth in them.

"Why not? All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

"You are presumptuous, sir. I do not need advice from a stranger."

"That's right, ma'am. We haven't been introduced. Maybe I can fix that." His smile was warm and friendly.

HE walked to the door. His gaze shuttled right and left, rested on an old man hobbling along the sidewalk. At the end of the path he intercepted him. "'Lo, Matt. How you doing? You're lookin' fine. Do you know the young lady that runs this store?"

"Miss Nora Hamilton—sure. What in Mexico you doing here? Ain't you got a lick of sense?"

"Got to see the elephant once in a while. You're the man I want." He tucked an arm under the old-timer's elbow and guided him up the walk.

"Where we goin', fellow?" Matt sputtered. "What's eating you."

"We're two young buckeroos calling on a lady. I want you to introduce me."

Matt's leathery wrinkled face took on an impish delight. "Sure, I'll give you a knock-down to her. By gravy, I'll fix it up nice."

To the girl Matt Chunn spoke his piece promptly. "Miss Nora, this scala-

wag wants to meet you. His name is Randy Sloan. He's one hell-poppin' son-of-a-gun and doesn't know sic' 'em. The Cottrells are liable to wind up his ball of yarn sudden if he don't cut dirt back to his own reservation. Most of the time he's in trouble up to his hocks—busts laws and goes whammin' around like he was the Czar of Rooshia. A plumb lunkhead, and no more safe for a young lady than a stick of dynamite at the end of a lighted fuse. Don't you have a thing to do with him."

"Thank you, Matt, for this wholehearted endorsement," Sloan answered. "You hit on only the high spots of my merits but Miss Nora has got the idea. I'm obliged for the send-off."

"Don't mention it. A rapscallion like you needs a little help." Chunn limped out of the shop well pleased with himself.

Sloan sat down on a chair, his forearms resting on the back. "You see where I stand with my friends, Miss Nora. Now we've been properly introduced we'll take up where we left off. May I accompany you to the schoolhouse dance next Saturday?"

In her eyes was an angry spark. "You are probably the most impudent man I ever met," she said quietly.

"Don't confuse impudence with ardor," he begged, imps of mischief dancing in his eyes. "You know what that poet chap said, 'He either fears his fate too much or his desert is small, who dares not—'"

The door opened and a young woman walked into the shop. She stopped, completely taken by the surprise of seeing a young man quoting poetry to the aloof Miss Hamilton, who had ignored the attempt of any man in Round Top to show friendliness. Her brows knitted in a puzzled frown while she tried to place him. A moment later her face froze. She recognized him now—the Sloan boy grown up. Randolph had known her at once. She was Julia Cottrell, a daughter of old Anse, the most lovely and disturbing girl in the county by all accounts. The years had done this for the longlegged little hoyden whose pigtails he had pulled in his urchin days.

In a cool husky voice the girl said to Nora, "I came to see if you are ready for a fitting, but since you're busy I'll come another time."

Color streamed into Nora's cheeks. "I'm not busy. I am glad you came. You can explain to me just how you want the ruffles on the dress."

The two young women discussed for a moment the problem of the dress, then Nora turned abruptly to Sloan.

"If you are able to travel don't let us detain you," she said sharply.

"We have a little unfinished business," he reminded her. "The dance on Saturday night."

"No. I'm not going. You know that very well."

"You may change your mind. I'll drop around about eight. Until then good-by. You must not keep Miss Cottrell waiting. That would not do."

Julia Cottrell looked at him arrogantly, her scornful gaze taking in his dusty sweat-stained clothes. The power of her family and her own self-willed good looks had built up in her an insolence seldom challenged. She had been brought up to think of the Sloans as vicious and troublesome pests and she resented the slightly amused look in his level eyes.

"I should think you would know better than to come to this town where your kind aren't tolerated," she said contemptuously.

His eyes narrowed as if in thought. "Where was it I read that this was a free country? Whoever wrote that hadn't heard of the great Anse Cottrell who rules the roost in Apache County."

Sloan turned, nodded at Nora, and walked out of the shop.

The eyes of both young women followed him. Neither of them thought of his worn travel-stained clothes but of the force they covered. The man gave an impression of clean strength. The broad shoulders, the flat back with the rippling muscles, the light tread smooth as that of a panther, belonged to a man unafraid, one master of himself. His reckless feet might have trodden wild

and perhaps crooked trails, but it was not likely that when danger jumped up at him the cold wind of fear would unnerve him.

Julia was annoyed. "Did you ever see such insolence? You are right not to go to the dance with him. It wouldn't do. He has not a good reputation. But of course you never go anywhere."

The dressmaker resented both the words and the manner of her customer. "Why wouldn't it do, if I wanted to go, which I don't?" she answered bitterly. "I haven't a good reputation either. Birds of a feather."

Miss Cottrell looked at Nora in surprise. "I did not mean to offend you," she said gently.

II

AFTER walking a short distance down the street, Randolph Sloan turned in at the bank. Brad Webber, its president and manager, invited him into the inclosed space set off for an office. He had already heard of the young man's encounter with Duff.

"You oughtn't to have come here," he said reprovingly.

Sloan laughed. "That's a song everybody I have met is singing," he said. "I came to see you about the mortgage—to get it renewed when it falls due next month."

The banker shook his head. "No use beating about the bush, boy. I can't do it. Anse Cottrell owns the bank now lock, stock, and barrel." Webber was not happy about this. He was a kindly middle-aged man and Randolph's father had been his friend.

This news was a shock to Sloan. He had mortgaged the ranch and cattle to buy adjoining land because he was convinced that the railroad pushing into this new territory would not only come by way of Bigg's Bend but must establish a division point there. One of the engineers surveying the terrain had told him this offered far the easiest route to Chrysolite where the big copper mines were located and was also the only spot except higher in the hills where an abundance of water was available. It stood out like a sore thumb that Old Anse meant to freeze him out and take over for himself the town site which would net a fortune. In this time of depression there was nobody Sloan knew who could afford to take the mortgage over.

"I have lost control of the bank and am only Anse's hired man," Webber explained bitterly. "I have to do as he says or get out."

Randolph Sloan knew this was true. "We are all under the old scoundrel's thumb," he admitted. "If we stand in his way, we can get off the earth."

His thoughts reverted to Julia Cottrell's pride and shifted to the young dressmaker whose attitude toward the town was so implacable.

"I met an hour ago a Miss Nora Hamilton," he said. "What do you know about her?"

Webber was no gossip. He mentioned the surface facts that she had recently come to town and started a shop.

"I know that. But what is the mystery about her? Why does she feel so unhappy?"

The banker chose his words carefully. "Personally I know nothing against her. The talk may not be true. The story is that she was involved in a killing, that her brother is in the Nebraska penitentiary for shooting a man on account of her. I am afraid some of our ladies have not been very kind to her."

"It must be shocking for the good people to have anybody connected with a killing come to live here," Randolph said drily. "Naturally they would treat her as if she had the smallpox."

In the succeeding days when the young man was riding the Bigg's Bend ranch range both of the young women he had met were a good deal on his mind. He had decided to return to Round Top for the dance. It might not be wise. On the other hand it might be a good move. In spite of his youth he was the leader of all the cousins and "in-laws" who had been banded against the Cottrells. A good many of the town's people resented the domination of Old Anse. It might be

The bullet ripped through a panel of the door after lifting Randy's hat from his head (Chap. II)

useful to re-establish a friendly relation with them.

When he swung into the saddle Saturday afternoon the sun was already setting behind the wine-red porphyry mountains. It was the flowering season and the foothills were one great splash of yellow poppies. On the desert the long green-leaved ocotillos were crowned with lovely scarlet flowers, the bisnaga bloomed with bright orange, and the prickly pear and mesquite flung out flags of color. Darkness had fallen before he tied at the hitchrack in front of Stump's store.

That Nora Hamilton had been expecting him was clear. She had dressed her hair less severely and looked younger. Instead of the plain black dress she was wearing a flowered challis with flaring skirts.

"You ought not to have come," she said.

He explained the reasons that had moved him.

"If you are trying to win the good opinion of the town, it won't do you any good to be seen with me." Color stirred in her cheeks. "Do you know what they say of me?"

"Yes. I too have a brother in the penitentiary." He grinned cheerfully at her. "We're tarred with the same brush."

The girl stood before him straight and still. Her tawny eyes challenged his verdict.

"That's not all they say about me," she stated quietly.

He thought, There is a great quiet pride in this woman.

"You're a right desperate character," he drawled. "But so am I. Facts in themselves never make the whole truth. That lies inside the souls of people. Before I was fifteen, I killed a man on this plaza. My father was down—wounded. Does that make me a murderer, when I did it to save him?"

"Not unless—"

"We were ambushed. Nobody except you and my brother in prison knows the bullet came from my rifle. It was in a clan battle, but if the Cottrells knew I did it I would probably be killed."

"I have forgotten you told me," she said, her eyes no longer stern.

"Why should I judge you, a good woman no matter what the facts say? I am a sinner too. My heart was full of hate for years. It still is sometimes."

Her emotions had been so long pent up within her that his understanding touched her closely. "Maybe I'll tell you about it some day. I'm not bad."

"Fine. Let's go."

She consented reluctantly.

The desks had been moved from the school room to make space for the dancers. They passed through a group of bashful young men hanging about the door. The benches placed around the walls were filled with the couples who had just been dancing and the older women who took the floor only occasionally. Julia Cottrell was sitting beside Duffy Suggs, a pimply faced boy of eighteen. She was wearing a dress Nora had made for her. It was a little daring for the time and place, but she was so gaily sure of herself that it made her beauty stand out the more. Sloan thought she was as brilliant and vivid as the desert flowers and, like those plants, carried a thorn that might leave a wound.

A big well-dressed man with a face intensely masculine joined Julia and asked for the next waltz. He wore a Prince Albert coat and custom-made boots well polished. He was John Bancroft, manager of the Sure Fire mine at Chrysolite, and he carried himself with an air of assurance.

The fiddlers struck up the music and Julia sailed away with him. Randolph discovered that Nora danced well. She had noticed the eyes watching them and after a turn around the room she said in a low voice, "I don't think they want us here. We ought not to have come."

"Some of them don't. Others are pleased. Let them get used to it."

Duffy Suggs asked Nora for the next waltz. She accepted with no enthusiasm, perfectly aware that he had come because Julia had sent him. It was a nice gesture on her part.

WHEN he was left alone, Sloan's eyes moved as if drawn by a magnet to Julia Cottrell. For a wonder she was not dancing. A reckless impulse stirred in him. He rose and circled the couples on the floor. "May I have the pleasure, Miss Cottrell?" he asked, imps of deviltry in his eyes.

The audacity of it struck the girl dumb for a moment. She searched for words with which to punish him. Color ran through her cheeks as her eyes held his. A wildness began to rise in her, a queer emotion she had never felt before. There was some quality in this man that was dangerous, something that appealed to her own adventurous spirit. She knew it would be better to refuse but she was a law to herself. Without a word she rose and he took her in his arms. Light as a feather on her feet, she responded instantly to his lead. Everybody watched them, aware of this dramatic minute when the head of the Sloans and the pride of the Cottrells were fused into a rhythmic unity.

Bill Cottrell broke the spell. As he passed the fiddlers he stopped to whisper in the ear of one. The music stopped. Sloan walked with Julia to her seat. She looked up at him, anger flaring in her eyes. "Don't ever speak to me again," she ordered.

Her fury was both at herself and at him. How had he dared do such a thing? And why had she yielded to the idiotic urge that had swept over her? What she had done was outrageous. Her father would have plenty to say about it.

SLOAN bowed and turned to join Nora. Bill Cottrell crossed the floor and glared at his sister. "You've played Ned," he told her. "Why don't you use your brains, if any?"

"I thought the feud was over and we were through shooting at him," she said in defense. "If we are to begin loving our enemies it is time to give a public demonstration of it."

They were twins and he knew her reactions better than anybody else. Her sarcasm was a rebound from the capricious wilfulness that had led her to disregard the feud and all its dreadful consequences. In a less spectacular way he had felt the same impulsion. It was hard for him to keep hot any hatred against Randolph Sloan.

"The old man will cuss you to a fare you well," he predicted. "Lucky you are a girl. If I had gone that far, he would wear me to a frazzle."

To Sloan Nora said, "I want to go home. That fellow Duff was in the entry a minute ago hating you. I think he is drunk. Please."

"After the next dance," he consented. "We must not slink away as if we had been whipped."

While they danced she played up to him, seemed absorbed in what he was saying. It was not wholly pretence. Just now they were two against the world and her valiant youth joined his to face the disapproval of a dozen Cottrell adherents beating on them.

As they walked back to the shop wrapped in the soft Southern night he said with a laugh, "They noticed we were there."

"We ought not to have gone," she replied. "That man Duff. He looked venomous."

"He's an ill-conditioned brute, but don't worry about him. Did you have a good time?"

"It was fun. I thought I had forgotten how to waltz. It has been years since—" She did not finish the sentence. Sloan knew her thought had reverted to the tragedy that had engulfed her youth.

"You needed a jolt—to remind you that you are young."

She shook her head. "I don't feel young like Julia. She isn't afraid of life."

"It hasn't pummeled her yet. She still feels invincible."

They turned in at the garden path leading to the shop. Her gaze rested on this man who had been hammered but not defeated, who was still so master of his fate. "Do you always do what you want to do?" she asked, thinking of his dance with Julia.

"What have you in mind?" he inquired.

"Under the circumstances a more discreet person might have hesitated to ask Julia to dance with him."

"A crazy idea," he admitted. "I get them sometimes."

"You must not come to see me again. Good night, Mr. Sloan."

"The name is Randy," he mentioned. "And why mustn't I?"

From the direction of the courthouse a shot crashed. The bullet ripped through a panel of the door after lifting Randolph's hat from his head.

He flung the door open and snapped, "Get in." From the step he scooped the hat, followed her swiftly into the house, and slammed the door as a second shot racketed across the square. His fingers found a bolt and pushed it home in the groove.

"You're not hit?" he asked, and edged her from in front of the door.

"No, I'm f-frightened." Her hand gripped his coat and clung to it. In the darkness he felt her body trembling close to his. He put an arm around her.

"The fireworks are all over," he told her by way of comfort. "You are quite safe now."

"Won't they try to break in?" Her voice quavered. Her white face stood out of the gloom.

"No. It must have been Duff. He is legging it for safety by this time. Assassins are cowards. He won't bother you after I leave."

"Don't go yet. He might be waiting."

They sat in the darkness for twenty minutes. He made light of Nora's fears. It was an adventure, now over, that she

would always remember. Beneath the surface of his talk he was deciding how to make his escape. No doubt Duff was waiting in the shadow of a building to get him when he came for his horse.

"Have you any kind of gun?" he asked.

"A small revolver."

"Will you lend it to me?"

Nora brought it. "You'll be awf'ly careful, won't you?"

He tilted her chin and looked down into her worried eyes.

"You can bet a lot on that," he answered, and kissed her lips.

IT was meant to be a brotherly kiss but it did not turn out that way. What had occurred in the past few hours had flung them together and they were no longer strangers. The girl's frozen emotions had come to life and the blood was racing through their veins. She wrenched herself away and stared at him, breathing deeply.

"I'm a fool," she said bitterly. "You'd better go."

"You're alive and not a marble statue," he differed.

Nora turned away, angry at herself and him, disturbed at her excitement. He opened the back door a few inches and looked out. His eyes searched the darkness.

"Bolt it soon as I go," he ordered.

A dog barked in the distance. There was no other sound and no rumor of movement. He made a wide semi-circumference of the square, keeping well back from the front of the buildings. Faintly the sawing of the fiddles came to him from the schoolhouse. Between two stores he crouched and saw his horse still standing patiently at Stump's rack. Besides the courthouse steps he made out a vague dark mass. That would be Duff waiting for him.

Sloan circled the square as far as the back of the Empire saloon. He slipped along the wall to the sidewalk in front of which stood three saddled horses belonging to some of those at the dance.

Bill Cottrell came out of the saloon. He said coldly, "So you've not gone home yet."

"Not yet," Sloan answered. "Neither has Duff." He took off his hat and pointed to the two holes in the crown.

Cottrell stared at it. "Great guns, you don't mean that Duff did that?"

"Don't blame him for missing. It's a little dark for accurate shooting. He didn't miss the young lady by more than six inches. You might take a look at her door. There are two bullet holes in it."

"Is this true? Or are you running a sandy on me?"

"True. If you would like to see a picture of patience on a monument go take a look at Duff. He's squatting by the courthouse steps near my horse waiting for me to show up. He'll have quite a wait. I'm going to borrow one of these broncs here."

"Dan is a drunken fool," Bill exploded. "We had nothing to do with this."

Sloan agreed ironically. "Not too dependable, is he? Trouble with warriors like Duff is that every once in a while they want to do a killing on their own account. I reckon you have to give them a little leeway. After all he was trying to get the right man."

"I'll beat his head off," young Cottrell threatened.

"Just because his enthusiasm made him a bit premature. You mustn't forget what good work he has done for you in the past." Randolph dismissed the subject airily. "Well, I'll be on my way. Here's where I start being a horse thief." He stepped from the sidewalk to select a mount.

"I'll go get your horse for you," Bill offered.

Sloan was looking at a sorrel carrying the Circle D brand. He chuckled. "Much obliged, but I won't trouble you. This one will suit me fine. Tell Mr. Duff I say thanks for his kindness in lending me a horse for the ride home. I'll tie the reins to the saddlehorns and it will find its way back to the Circle D."

The Bigg's Bend rancher swung to the saddle, turned the cowpony, and passed between the buildings to the alley at a road gait.

Bill listened until he heard the clop-clop of the horse's hoofs die away in the darkness. What had occurred disturbed him greatly. It might mean the breaking out again of the feud. The drunken ruffian had put his family in a bad spot, since it was generally recognized that Duff was a tool of Old Anse. To try to kill Randolph Sloan without giving him a chance was bad enough, but to run the risk of hitting a woman was an incredible folly that made the shooting far worse. Moreover, Nora Hamilton might still be in danger. In his condition the fellow could start firing at the house.

Cottrell crossed the road to the courthouse and softfooted around the building to the front. He saw a figure huddled beside the steps.

"If you are waiting there to murder Sloan you are wasting your time," Bill called. "He's left town."

Duff's big body swung toward him. "Come out of there with your hands up," the man snarled.

"Don't push on the reins. It's Bill Cottrell." The young man moved forward, arms hanging at his side.

"How'd you know he's gone?"

"I saw him go—on your sorrel. There's a back door to the Hamilton house."

"On my horse?" Duff broke into a string of savage curses.

BILL waited till he stopped for breath. "You've got yourself in a fine jam. This town is liable to string you up for shooting at a woman."

"I didn't shoot at any woman."

"You didn't miss her a foot. The bullet holes in the door will show that. You'd better fork Sloan's horse and light out sudden."

"Don't tell me what to do," Duff broke out angrily. "Not after pistol-whippin' me the way you did. I've a mind to whale the stuffin' out of you right now. I've took enough from your family. You can tell Anse I'm through doing his dirty work."

"Tell him yourself. You haven't the sense of a half-wit. If you had killed Sloan you would have been rubbed out inside of a week. This country is tired of your bullying ways. A lot of people are afraid of you when you get on your rampages and they would be glad to see you dead and buried. Don't tell me you were a gunman for the Cottrells. You were playing your own hand tonight, and you can't shove the blame off on us. Jump that bronc, get out, and don't come back till folks have time to cool off."

A glimmer of sense penetrated Duff's sodden brain. Men would come and look at the bullet holes in Nora Hamilton's door and their rage would boil up at him. He mumbled explanations and threats but ended by pulling himself into the saddle of Sloan's horse and riding out of town.

When Julia walked into the room her father called his office he was sitting in front of a battered pine table adding with a two-inch stub of pencil his monthly pay roll. For the rest of the house

[*Turn page*]

fast HELP for HEADACHE
UPSET STOMACH - JUMPY NERVES

When headache hits, do as millions do. Take Bromo-Seltzer right away for fast help. Not only for the pain of headache but also for the upset stomach and jumpy nerves that often go with it.

Bromo-Seltzer effervesces with *split-second action*, ready to go to work at once to fight headache three ways. Caution: Use only as directed.

Try Bromo-Seltzer. You must be satisfied or your money back!

Get Bromo-Seltzer at your drug-store fountain or counter today. A product of the Emerson Drug Co. since 1887.

BROMO-SELTZER

he had bought golden oak furniture and such window drapes as his daughter had insisted upon, but this room was his own and as poorly equipped as that of a penniless nester. No carpet covered the floor, and except for the table it was bare but for two kitchen chairs. On the unpapered walls hung a patent medicine catalogue and a picture of a Hereford bull torn from a magazine; also a Colt's .45 suspended from a wooden peg and a sawed-off shotgun resting on the tines of deer's horns.

The girl said uneasily, "You want to see me." Her smile lacked conviction. She knew he was boiling with anger. That she was his favorite and had been allowed to have her own way usually would not help her now. She had gone too far—unless she could divert his rage to Duff.

He paid no attention to her but went on adding the columns, his lips moving as he murmured the figures. Anse Cottrell was a short barrel-chested man with heavy rounded shoulders and a thick body. Though he had taken on a lot of flesh, there was still a steel band of muscles across his big stomach. He carried his weight badly, letting it settle down so that he looked something like a lumpy shapeless toad. His harsh features were knotted together into a gross powerful face with just a suggestion of slyness. To Round Top it was amazing that this bullnecked strong-jawed atavist could have fathered anyone as dainty and lovely as Julia.

Anse slammed down his note book and wheeled on the girl suddenly. "So you're carrying on with Randolph Sloan," he snarled.

"I danced with him, if you call that carrying on," she answered.

"Why?" He hammered the table with his fist. "Tell me that."

Julia had courage. Her eyes met his steadily. "I don't know, unless it was to find out what a Sloan is like. All my life I've been hearing how bad they are."

"They are stiffnecked fighting fools, overbearing and quarrelsome. I'll learn you to make up to one of them."

"You've described us too, haven't you? And I wasn't making up to him. After the dance I told him out loud before everybody never to speak to me again."

"You're a fine daughter. Have to flirt with every man you meet, even if he is an enemy. I've broken this bunch of scalawags. The Sloans all dead or driven out except this fellow and their kin so cowed they eat dirt. Now you've probably fixed it so I'll have to rub out this young squirt too."

"Dan Duff may save you the trouble. Last night he tried it while this Sloan and Nora Hamilton were saying good night in front of her shop. I've seen the bullet holes in the door—two of them. He couldn't have missed Nora more than a few inches."

Anse slammed his fist angrily on the table. "I'll rip the hide off Dan if this is true," he snarled.

"Maybe we are going too far shooting at a woman even if it is only Nora Hamilton who isn't all she should be according to the old cats' gossip."

"Keep your mouth shut. It's not my fault Dan is a fool. I don't pay any mind to how bad this woman is. That's not the point."

"She isn't bad at all. I don't know anybody nicer."

Cottrell's eyes narrowed in thought. It would be a good idea to call on this Hamilton woman. He could be properly indignant at the shooting and scotch any story that he was implicated in it.

"You and I will call on her and let her know I will protect her against anything like this happening again. And I'll warn her to have nothing to do with Randy Sloan if she wants to stay in Round Top."

"She'll love that, since he is the only person here that has been kind to her. If you are going to threaten her you had better go alone. I'll stay at home."

"You'll do as I say." He added harshly: "If I have to use a quirt to you."

"The one you use on your horse," she suggested scornfully, and quoted an old saying, "A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more you beat them the better they be."

"Get your bonnet," he growled. "We're going now."

As they left the house Julia flung a taunt at him. "Aren't you going to take your whip, to use in case she turns out to be obstinate?"

III

RANDY SLOAN and Tim Jolly, one of his two riders, were branding in the corral the last of half a dozen calves when Morgan Vance rode up and swung from the saddle. He had been riding the line and had stopped on the way home to pick up the mail at the Cross Roads store.

Morg had chased cows for the Sloan family more than twenty years. He was a small man past fifty, bow-legged and slightly lame from a badly healed broken leg caused by a horse rolling over it. His face was wrinkled as a withered pippin and criss-crossed lines scored a diamond-shaped pattern on the leathery back of his tanned neck. In spite of long hard years in the saddle he had a cocky jauntiness of spirit that showed in his tilted hat and chirpy voice.

"Met your friend Dan Duff at the store and had a little chat with him," he mentioned, his forearms resting on the top rail of the fence.

Sloan took the long hot branding iron from the fire and burned the Box S on the flank of the calf Jolly was holding. An acrid smell of burnt hair and flesh rose into the air along with the blatting of the animal. Jolly released the calf and it ran to join the others huddled at the far end of the corral.

Randy walked to the fence and took his mail—a letter, a newspaper, and an advertising circular. "What did Duff have to say at this pleasant reunion?" he asked casually.

"Plenty. I gather he doesn't like you or me either. He was itchin' to beat me up and said so. Looked like I had my tail in a crack, me not having a gun with me. I don't know what held him back."

"Orders from Anse Cottrell likely."

"Maybe so, but I had plenty luck. He cussed me out from soda to hock. I thought sure he was going to dust me with his quirt. From now on I tote a hogleg when I'm away from the ranch."

"But he didn't lay a hand on you."

"Nary a hand, but he had a yearnin' to gun me when I hit the saddle. I didn't wait to roll a smoke before I started."

Sloan opened the letter. His face lit up. "From Judge Simmons. He was in Phoenix Saturday and called on Governor Brodie. Seems they had written President Roosevelt and asked him to pardon Sumner. They had not told me about it so I wouldn't get my hopes too high. Brodie was lieutenant-colonel in the Rough Riders and whipped the regiment into shape before it went to Cuba. Lucky for Sumner that he was one of Teddy's troopers."

"Have they heard from Roosevelt?" Jolly asked.

"He has pardoned Sumner."

Morgan Vance flung his hat in the air and let out a joyous whoop. "Hi-yi-yippy-yi!"

Sloan turned and walked into the house. He did not want the others to see the tears in his eyes. . . .

Through the window of the bank Anse Cottrell saw his daughter and John Bancroft ride down the street. From their laughter he judged they were having a good time. This pleased him. It would suit him very well to have her marry this man who was evidently much attracted to her. Julia was ambitious and no fool. She must know that in getting him she would be making a better match than any other likely to come her way.

Bancroft was not only important in his own right as manager and part owner of the Sure Fire mine; he was also a nephew of Miles Hancock, the controlling influence in the railroad building toward the Chrysolite mines. After he had foreclosed on the Sloan property, Anse expected to make a great deal of money from his holdings at the new division town that would rise at Bigg's Bend.

He turned to Webber. "Did you tell Sloan his note would have to be paid when it falls due?" he inquired.

"Yes, I did," Webber replied.

"Mistake. I don't see where he could raise the money, but there was no need to warn him."

The banker flushed. "He asked me and I told him. I was not going to lie."

"Why not? The only way to treat a Sloan is to stamp on him."

"I thought you wanted peace."

"So I do. That's why I'll have to bust this bully-puss upstart." The eyes of the man were cold as a wind from an ice-covered lake.

Webber liked no part of this. "I don't see that he is bothering you."

"Not necessary you should," Anse retorted arrogantly. "I see it and won't stand for it. Maybe I'll put him behind bars to join his brother."

WEBBER decided to hand this old gray wolf a jolt. "Have you seen Tuesday's *Republican?*" he asked, and tossed across the desk the Phoenix newspaper with a marked story on the front page.

Cottrell read it, his face purpling with rage. "Jeff Simmons did this and that no-account Brodie. They got that grandstanding Roosevelt to pardon the killer. I'll show them, if it's the last thing I ever do."

"That's no way to talk, Anse," the banker said. "Sumner has served five years for killing Joe Tappan and plenty of people think he didn't do it. You don't want to start trouble."

"Are you telling me what I'm to do?" Anse yelped. "Remember you're my hired man and I can bust you wide open." He snatched up his shapeless hat and stormed out of the bank.

Brad Webber sat there a long time, his eyes fixed on the ink bottle without seeing it. Anse Cottrell's appetite for power, for trampling down opposition, had become an obsession. He was riding for a fall, but before that day came he could ruin a score of lives. Brad had spent many years building up the bank and now had lost control of it to this bull-headed old tyrant. He would either have to be a party to the man's appalling malignity or be tossed into the discard. An embryonic plan to save Sloan began to form in his mind.

Anse was no reckless bad man. He plotted his campaigns carefully, kept in the background under cover, and instigated others to carry out his plans. When Dan Duff shuffled into his office, he showed no surprise. One of his agents had dropped a word into the ear of the big ranchman that had brought him to town.

Duff glared sourly at the older man. "I'm here," he rasped.

"So I see. You have some business with me?"

"Gus Shonsey told me you wanted to see me."

Anse shook his head. "Gus must have got me wrong, but since you have come sit down."

The rancher stayed on his feet. He knew Cottrell had sent Shonsey with a message and now was pretending that he had not. The sly old schemer was full of tricks like that.

"I don't get it," Duff growled resentfully. "You gave me hell last time you saw me and said we were traveling different roads from now on. Then you send for me. What you want? Quit coverin' up and come clean."

"Sit down," Anse ordered. "Seeing you are here I'll give you a piece of news you won't like. Sumner Sloan is loose again and headin' this way."

Duff's mouth tightened. Several seconds passed before he spoke. "You mean he's broke out of the pen."

"No. Turned loose. Pardoned by that tinhorn hero Roosevelt. Brodie and that busybody Judge Simmons who presided at Sloan's trial got their heads together and fixed it up. Simmons always has hated me and has jumped at the chance to irritate me. Likely he worked on Brodie because Sumner was in Cuba with the Rough Riders. And that would go a long way with Roosevelt too."

Duff digested this in silence for a moment. "What you aim to do about it?" he asked.

"Me? Nothing." Cottrell's face showed bland surprise. "It's no skin off my nose. Thought you'd be interested."

"Why me more than you?"

"He's of no importance to me, outside of being a nuisance. But you're the one who put him behind bars. Of course maybe he's got religion and forgiven you. The vilest sinner may return, my hymn book says."

"Is it your idea that he'll go gunnin' for me?" Duff demanded.

"I wouldn't know. He used to be a rambunctious devil."

"He hates you much as he does me. He knows you were back of the frame-up that sent him to jail."

"Your memory is a little defective, Dan. I didn't sit in the witness box and perjure myself to convict him the way you did."

"Blast it, you engineered the whole thing. Now you want to shove it off on me. I won't stand for it."

"Better explain that to him when you meet. Maybe you two will get to sleepin' under the same tarp." Cottrell tee-heed at the thought.

DUFF was irritated as well as worried. Sumner Sloan would never rest until he had evened the score. He guessed that Anse meant to use him as a cat's-paw and that he would probably be driven to accepting the role. He had to get the jump on the returned convict.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked doggedly.

"Far as I'm concerned nothing. But you're in a spot, Dan. No use foolin' yourself into thinkin' you're not. Better talk it over with Gus Shonsey and Clint LePage. They were witnesses too and won't be feelin' too easy now Sumner is around again. But don't go off half-cocked and do anything foolish. Play it safe whatever you do."

Duff looked down at the slumped figure of Cottrell who was so smugly passing the problem over to him. A devil of hatred looked out of the big man's eyes. He had always griped at being the man's tool. Cottrell had used him almost contemptuously, as if he were no more than a two-spot in the old man's game. Some day his rage would boil over, though as yet he had kept it within bound. Anse knew too much of his activities outside the law.

"Like you do," he sneered. "What you mean is play it safe for you, so afterward you can shake your head like the pious old hypocrite you are and throw me down."

"Hard names break no bones, Dan."

"I know what you want, but you won't come out and say it. Last week you cussed me out for taking a crack at one brother; now you want me to bump off the other. A killing is fine when you want it, but if one of us cuts loose on his own there's hell to pay. We got to wait till you order it."

Cottrell's beady eyes were hard and cold. "I'm giving you no orders of any kind. Don't put words in my mouth. You're a free agent. All I have done is warn you that Sumner Sloan is on the loose again. If you want to sit around and have him cut you down, it's nothing to me."

"Do you know when he's goin' to get here?"

"No. Maybe he won't show up at all. But my hunch is he'll be on the stage tomorrow and make straight for their ranch."

"Unless a welcoming committee stops his clock."

"If it was any of my business I would say that was a plumb fool idea. If you mean to protect yourself, don't do it here in town. He'll probably make a break and you can take measures then."

"Providing I'm still alive. I get your point, Anse." Duff's lip curled in a sneer. "Better dry gulch him somewheres out in the chaparral where nobody will think you responsible."

"Now you're doing my thinking for me. All I've said is that this fellow is a wild and reckless brawler and for you to be careful."

"Yeah, I heard you," Duff jeered.

He turned and swaggered out of the house. The thought was simmering in his mind that he would be a fool to sit around and let the Sloans get the jump on him just because it suited Anse Cottrell.

IV

NORA HAMILTON met Matt Chunn in front of her store and the old-timer flung at her, his eyes twinkling, a bit of news. "That ding-busted hellamiler of yores is back in town today, Miss Nora."

"I didn't know I owned one," she told him.

"Hmp! That Randy Sloan. For pure unadulterated gall that boy has got the world whipped."

She smiled. "We can agree on that. He does seem to go after what he wants. But he's not mine. I haven't seen him since the dance."

"The nerve of him dancin' with Miss Julie. Minds me of when I was a twenty-dollar a month cowpoke and all I wanted was a saddle, a quirt, a bronc, and onct in a while God send Sunday so I could go callin'."

"Did you too rob stages, Mr. Chunn?"

"That ain't been proved on Randy and it won't. He's got enemies. He ain't the kind to shoot down a guard just for the fun of it."

The old man's quick resentment pleased her. She could not believe what Anse Cottrell had told her. Wild and reckless though Randy might be, it did not seem in character for him to be a callous killer. The picture of him she had in her mind was that of a man debonair and fearless facing peril with his head up.

She was dusting the counter when Randy walked into the shop. He had come to return the revolver while he was on the way to the stage station to meet his brother Sumner.

"I want you to meet him. Maybe not today, but soon. I see Duff's calling cards are still on the door. Have you had any trouble since that night?"

"No. People have been kinder." She smiled ironically. "Mr. Anson Cottrell has taken me under his protection. With one stipulation. I am to have nothing to do with an evil young man who held up a stage and killed the guard."

"That was one of the old fox's schemes that missed fire. He planned it nice too. The three bandits rode horses carrying the Bigg's Bend brand. They had picked out mounts up on the range. One of the fellows called the leader Randy. Another limped like one of my riders Morg Vance does. It was a put-up job but two nesters gave us an alibi and Anse didn't have the nerve to carry through."

"It's nearly stage time," she reminded him. "I'm awf'ly glad about your brother."

"Your new guardian Old Anse won't be. By the way, are you going to take his advice and drop that scalawag Randy Sloan?"

A swift smile lit her face and made it almost beautiful. "Not on his say-so."

"Lady, I'm going to like you certain. *Adios, muchacha.*"

A light breeze from the mountains swept down the street and lifted into the air a small dust devil that danced ahead of Randolph in an inverted cone. As he passed Gwinn's hardware store he met Julia Cottrell and John Bancroft. The man wore well-cut riding breeches and a tweed coat, the girl a sprigged muslin with a blue sash around her waist. She responded to Sloan's bow with the cut direct.

Against the adobe wall of Jim Wong's restaurant a small man was leaning, his slender body motionless as a statue. A cold wind blew through Sloan. The wary half-shuttered eyes of this still lounger were resting on him steadily. Randy wondered if Cully Ducret knew or guessed that Sumner was coming in on the stage today. During the feud fighting days Ducret had been the personal guard of Anse Cottrell. He was a Texan with a record as a gunfighter. Six years ago he and Sumner had met on the square and when the guns had stopped roaring, Ducret lay wounded in the street.

Sloan held to an even stride across the courthouse yard. He said quietly, "A fine day, Mr. Ducret." The frozen gaze of the cat-eyed man held fast to that of Randy a long moment before he turned and walked away without answering. The Texan moved with

smooth rhythm, almost noiselessly. Though a notorious leather-slapper, quick and deadly on the trigger, he was a rare type of bad man. Liquor he never touched. Except casually he knew no women. No emotional handicaps interfered with his efficiency behind a six-shooter. A lone wolf, he went his way neither boasting nor swaggering. When he spoke to others, his voice was low and courteous.

As Randolph moved down Jeff Davis street he saw three men come out of Mike's Cowboys Retreat. They were Dan Duff, Gus Shonsey, and Clint LePage. A gather of our enemies, Sloan thought at once, tying their presence instantly to the arrival of his brother. Again he felt that curious sixth sense of danger, a nervous tension crowding in on him.

At the end of the street the stage was already topping the hill. As always, Hank Main, the driver, brought the Concord down the home stretch fast. The last three hundred yard gallop was for him usually the high moment of the day. His foot jammed the brake down and he dragged the sweat-stained horses to a halt.

SUMNER SLOAN was a tall gaunt man, strongly built. Fierce eyes looked out defiantly from a thin face that still held the prison pallor. He said, flat-voiced, "'Lo, Randy," and the younger man nodded a casual greeting. No observer could have guessed that a tide of feeling churned in them.

Old Matt Chunn shuffled forward. "Sure pleased to see you, Sumner. Like old times again." His high falsetto voice dropped to a whisper. "Bunch of wolves lookin' for you boys."

Randolph nodded. "Much obliged, Matt. Saw 'em on the way down." He turned to his brother. "You heeled, Sum?"

"Bought me a gun at Tucson. You figure there will be trouble?"

"Afraid so. Ducret is waiting on the square near our mounts, and I noticed Duff, Shonsey and LePage coming out of Mike's place. If they mean war we can't duck it."

"A nice friendly homecoming," Sumner said bitterly.

Seeing the two, one would at once have guessed they were brothers. They had the same long rangy look and reaching stride. The bone conformation of their faces was similar.

As they moved up the alley their eyes searched the top of the adobe corral fence on one side of the lane and the rear of the buildings on the other. The price of life for them during the next few minutes might be vigilance.

A man crossed the alley in front of them, glanced their way, and vanished between two buildings. They could hear the slap of his running feet.

"In a hurry," Sumner said drily.

"Yes. Hod Crane. Rides for Anse Cottrell. On the jump to report."

The Sloans came out of the alley to the courthouse square. Duff and his two companions had arrived before them. They were grouped on the other side of the plaza. At sight of the brothers they separated. Duff stayed in the alcove of Frenchy's pool room. Shonsey, a heavy short man in his forties, cut down at a right angle toward the Sloans. LePage crossed the lawn and disappeared behind the courthouse.

Sumner tilted his head toward a man sitting on the rear steps of the courthouse. "Ducret too," he said grimly. "They don't aim to have us leave town, not ever."

The Texan was smoking a cigar, lounging negligently with a forearm resting on the step back of him. He was the picture of a man at ease taking a siesta in the sun.

Randolph had the odd feeling of having gone through all this before, though the pattern was different from other battles in which he had been engaged. Etched in his memory, former moments came to life when men like pieces on a chess board were shifted to their positions to gain an advantage. He brushed this aside and concentrated wholly on the present.

A six-mule ore outfit driven by a jerk line stood in the road close to the

Sloans. They took a position back of the wagon. The driver came out of a harness shop and started to free from a hitching post the near front leader.

Randolph said, "Not just now, mister."

The mule skinner wheeled in sharp surprise. "What's that?"

"Leave that wagon where it's at."

"Why?"

"Friend, you had better *vamos*. Hell is going to pop."

The driver's startled gaze swept the plaza. He was an old-timer and this scene carried back to others when the feud had been active. Without another word he bolted back into the store from which he had come.

Two more men appeared, emerging from Jeff Davis Street. One of them was Hod Crane.

"Stay put," Shonsey shouted to them.

In the long dragging silence before the guns began to sound a meadow lark lifted its full-throated song.

"Come out and take your medicine, you wolves," Duff cried. "Your string has done run out."

"Suits us here," Sumner called back harshly. "If you want us, come and get us."

LePage and Shonsey were edging closer.

"Don't crowd us," Randolph warned.

A bullet whipped across the plaza and struck the tire of a wheel. Duff gave a triumphant yell. "Go get 'em, boys."

Sumner's gun smoked an answer. Half a dozen shots followed, so close together that the sound of them almost merged. At the roar of Duff's first shot Shonsey had disappeared into the store behind him and run around the alley. Now he came loping through the harness shop from the rear.

"Look out," Sumner warned.

RANDOLPH wheeled, to see Shonsey firing from the store window back of them. His .45 boomed a fraction of a second before that of young Sloan. Randolph felt something slap his shoulder. He saw Shonsey teetering in the window, trying to balance himself on feet spread wide apart. The man's knees sagged and his body plunged forward, crashing through the glass to the sidewalk outside. He lay on his face, a man already dead. Randolph was never more surprised in his life.

"Crowd 'em! Crowd 'em!" Duff screamed.

But the attackers hung back. The sight of Shonsey's body hurtling through the window was a disturbing sight. They had looked for an easy kill, but they knew now it would not be that way. The Sloans had the cover of the ore wagon and it would be hard to drive them from it.

"Rush 'em yourself, Dan," jeered LePage. "Nobody has got you hogtied."

A shot from Sumner's revolver racketed across the square. Hod Crane ripped out an oath. "I'm hit," he cried.

The Texan still sat on the courthouse steps. He had taken no part in the shooting. A spiral of smoke rose from his cigar. Out of the line of fire he was leaning back on an elbow relaxed.

"What's eatin' you, Ducret?" shouted Duff. "Get into this and drill 'em."

Ducret rose to his feet. "Kill your own snakes, Duff," he answered. "I'm not in this rookus." He turned and disappeared in the corridor of the building.

Crane backed away, nursing his wounded arm. "If Cully is staying out, I'm through."

"We've got them trapped, boys," Duff cried. "Stay with it and we'll stop their clocks right now."

Randolph's voice flung back an answer. "Not before two-three of you have gone to hell on a shutter."

A warning from the second-story window of the bank building sounded during a momentary quiet. Bill Cottrell was sitting on the sill, a rifle in his hands. "I'll cut down the next man that fires," he announced. "On either side."

Duff looked up. "So you're double-crossin' again," he growled.

The barrel of the rifle swung around to cover Duff. "Make a move, Dan, and you're a gone goose," Bill cautioned.

The big rancher was glad to withdraw

from a battle that was turning against them and this gave him a chance to save face. "I play your old man's hand and he throws me down," he complained bitterly and disappeared into Frenchy's pool room.

A minute earlier the plaza's quiet had been shattered by the roar of guns. Now the Sloans saw no enemies in sight except the dead man lying at Sumner's feet.

The rest had scurried away.

The older brother made a discovery. "You've been hit, Randy."

"In the shoulder. Only a flesh wound. I reckon we had better drop in and see Doc Jones."

Matt Chunn came out of a store and hailed the brothers joyously. "By gorry, you showed 'em. That bunch of wolves will think twice before they tackle you again.

"We had luck," Randolph said.

"You pumped out your own luck," the old man squeaked in his high falsetto. "You made only one mistake. That Duff got off without a scratch."

Still carrying the rifle, Bill Cottrell met the Sloans. He explained that this was none of his father's doing. Duff and his crowd had attacked on their own.

Hard-eyed, Sumner glared at him. "Just like a Cottrell, trying to pass the buck to the gunfighters you hire."

Bill flushed angrily but said nothing. Randy spoke up for him.

"He had nothing to do with this, Sum. He broke up the shooting."

Young Cottrell did not blame Sumner. If the story he had dug out by listening to bits of talk here and there was grounded on fact, the man had a legitimate reason for hating Anse and this attempt to kill him would not lessen his anger.

Bill walked beside the brothers to the office of the doctor. He wanted to protect them from the chance of a bullet flung from some door or window.

Doctor Jones was dressing the wound of another patient. At sight of the Sloans, Hod Crane jumped from the table on which he was lying and reached for his revolver.

"Hold it!" Randolph warned. "Or we'll drill you sure."

"Too bad I did not shoot straighter," Sumner said. "If you feel lucky, Hod, cut loose your wolf and start smokin'."

"No, no!" the doctor blurted out. "Not here in my office."

CRANE'S hand slid from the butt of his weapon.

"I ain't lookin' for trouble," he growled.

"If you're sure of that better get back and let Doctor Jones finish the job on you," Sumner told him harshly. "He has a more important patient waiting."

The wounds of both men were comparatively slight. When the Sloans walked out of the office, they found Bill Cottrell standing there. Before either of them could say a word Bill spoke curtly. No matter how they felt about it he was going to see them safely out of town. Sumner exploded that they did not need a Cottrell for a nursemaid. Bill paid no heed to the annoyed protest. He walked a yard or two back of the brothers to the rack where their horses were tied. His wariness did not relax until the sound of their cantering mounts had died away.

The Sloans rode through the shabby suburbs of the town into the clean blossoming desert. This was familiar terrain to Sumner. He was coming back to his own country, the district where he had been born and brought up. But before he had been back five minutes the pattern of the future had been set. There could be no peace now. Already Old Anse must be busy building a story to put the blame on the Sloans. Since Sumner was a convicted killer it would be hard to explain why so soon after his pardon he had gone into another fight in which one of his foes had been killed. There were witnesses who could testify the brothers had fought in self-defense, but Anse had a knack of obscuring the truth adroitly. Next time the attack would be planned better. Very likely it would be a warfare of sniping from the chaparral where the silent hills would tell no story.

V

IN a few days the Sloans received a letter that relieved them of one of their worries. It was from Brad Webber. He had three thousand dollars that was not working, he wrote, and after he and his wife had put their heads together they had decided to lend it to the sons of their old friend Sumner Sloan to pay the note due on the eighteenth of the current month. The only stipulation was that this loan must be kept a secret to prevent Anse Cottrell learning the source of the money. The two brothers could write him a mortgage note for that amount which he would not at present record.

Randolph guessed that this sum was nearly all the Webbers had except for their home and the offer of it warmed his heart. He and Sumner slipped into town one night, dropped in to see the Webbers, and returned to the ranch with the money in cash.

On the morning of the eighteenth the Sloans rode to town again but did not take the desert way. As a precaution against a possible ambush they skirted the edge of the foothills across a country seamed with gullies, small arroyos bounded by land spikes shooting out from the range above. They traveled in and out among the green foliage of the huisache and mesquite bushes.

Anse Cottrell reached the bank before they did. He was not expecting trouble in broad daylight, but he always went prepared for it. He not only carried a concealed .44 but as an added safeguard took Cully Ducret with him. There was no telling how wrought up the Sloans might be at losing the ranch and stock. His shapeless body settled itself back of the railing which inclosed the space serving as an office.

"Like as not they won't show up," he snarled at Webber. "Why would they seeing they haven't got a nickel to satisfy the note?"

"I think they'll be here," Webber differed mildly. "I saw them go into Stump's store a little while ago."

"After today they will be a pair of footloose saddlebums," Cottrell predicted, gloating over the prospect.

The banker made no comment. He did not care to start an argument. In a few minutes Anse was going to be furious enough without any more help on his part.

Through the window Webber caught sight of the Sloans on the sidewalk. They came into the bank.

Webber said, "Come right in, boys, and take those two chairs." He held the gate open for them.

The brothers stayed outside the railed office. "We won't need chairs, Brad," Sumner said. His cold hard eyes were fastened on the half-shuttered ones of Ducret. Until the recent fight the two had not met since the day of their duel on the courthouse square half a dozen years earlier.

This was true of Anse and the Sloans too. He had not stood face to face with them for many months. The last time he had seen Sumner was when the young man was being sentenced to the penitentiary. A sly sense of triumph stirred in him. He had them whipped and was about to take their home from them.

"You Sloans have got nobody to blame but yourselves for the fix you're in," he said, his smile oozing malignity. "I warned your father and your uncle Tracy, but they were hell bent on ruining me. Now you are scraping the bottom of the barrel. I aim to be forgiving like the Good Book tells me to." He took a wallet from his pocket and slowly counted out some bills, putting them into two piles of twenty-five dollars each. "That will get you-all out of this territory before outraged citizens hang you to a live oak—if you hit the trail fast."

Randolph said quietly, an ironic bite to his voice, "You're generous."

"I'll expect you to give me a quit claim deed to your land, seeing it's practically mine anyway." He read a contemptuous refusal in Randolph's face and a dull flush beat into his cheeks. "This country is tired of having you ride around robbing stages and killing citizens. You're through."

Sumner was watching Ducret closely,

his jaw muscles hard as steel. He let his younger brother do the talking.

"Not quite," Randolph answered. "Get over the idea that you are God, you fat slug. We're here to pay that mortgage note. Where is it?"

The beady eyes of Cottrell shifted from one of the Sloans to the other, a startled doubt in them. But a moment's reflection told him they could not possibly have the money. He slapped the note down on the desk. "I'll not take on account a nickel less than the whole amount. Let me see you dig it up."

Without shifting his gaze from Ducret, Sumner drew from a hip pocket a tobacco sack bulging with bills. He handed it to Randolph who counted out three thousand dollars and then added one hundred twenty for six months interest at eight per cent.

COTTRELL stared at the money as if hypnotized. He raised his eyes to glare at Randolph. "Where did you get this?" he demanded hoarsely.

Young Sloan spoke evenly, "Will you examine the bills and see that they are not counterfeit, Mr. Webber?" he said.

Webber did so. "It's good money," he answered.

"I won't accept it," Anse cried, his face a map of rage. "You got it from that stage robbery near Blue Creek where you killed Watt Saulsbury. There's blood on it. You can't pay a debt to me with it."

Randolph's anger left him ice cold. "I gave this mortgage to the bank, Mr. Webber. You have seen me offer to pay the note. I'll leave the money with you in the bank and ask for a receipt and a statement that the offer has been made."

To Cottrell Webber said, "You'll have to take the money, Anse. It's a legal proffer. If you don't I have no option but to give Randy a receipt for it."

"Where did he get it?" Anse repeated, fury boiling in him.

"You'll never know," Randolph answered. "It's none of your business. Take it or leave it."

Cottrell took it. There was nothing else for him to do. He scrawled on the face of the note, *Paid in full with money robbed from the Blue Creek stage after Watt Saulsbury was murdered.* Beneath this he signed his name. Webber picked up the paper and read with startled eyes what was written on it.

"For God's sake, Anse," he exclaimed.

Randolph took the note from the banker. His lean taut face tightened. These were fighting words, written by a man whose implacable hate had suddenly become unleashed against his better judgment. Young Sloan fought down the surge of passion that poured through him. If he read the insulting words aloud guns would blaze instantly. Sumner and Ducret would accept them as a challenge to battle.

He asked quietly, "Is this a legal receipt, Brad?"

Webber's frozen face relaxed. Randolph had chosen not to force a fight now. "It's legal enough," the banker said.

The cat eyes of Ducret, deceptively sleepy, slid contemptuously toward Cottrell. He knew only that the note had been signed. In spite of his big talk Anse was accepting defeat. The Texan had not spoken a word since coming into the bank. He said nothing but his employer knew the man was waiting for a signal.

Cottrell did not give it. His sly caution was uppermost now dominating the wild impulse that had driven him to forget his old policy of playing safe. Arrogant and ruthless though he was, he preferred to take as few chances as possible. Without pity he had harried nesters from the water holes they had homesteaded. His riders had torn down fences, trampled crops, and fired houses. More than one poor settler had found a grave in dry gulches under piles of stone because of obstinacy. But these two men were a different breed from the hunted nesters he had rubbed out. They were no easy run-of-the-range covered wagon drifters.

The gaze of Anse shuttled from one to the other and he read them aright as dangerous. From Sumner's lean bit-

ter face looked out gray eyes that told of a spirit hammered hard as steel by the experiences he had endured. In his younger brother was a stark fighting fire that only death could defeat. In driving them to a battle on even terms there could be no profit. Ducret was incredibly swift on the draw. He would get one of them, perhaps both, but very likely not before a bullet was pumped into Cottrell's big body.

Brad spoke evenly. "No need for hard feelings, gentlemen. This is only a business matter. Randy borrowed the money and now is paying it back. Nothing wrong with that."

Anse pushed back his chair, the legs grating harshly on the floor. He got to his feet and glared at Randolph, a hot devil of hate in his eyes. The gross body looked more than ever like a swollen toad.

"You've gone bad just like that jail brother of yours," he ground out, teeth clenched behind the thin lips that made a slit in the evil face. "Bad blood, the whole pack of you. I've been holdin' back a bunch of fellows set to rub you out like they would wolves, but I won't protect you any longer. They can do it, and I wish them luck."

"You're a little excited, Anse," Webber told him. "Take it easy."

"We'll do our own protecting, as we've been doing," Randolph flung out curtly. "Warn your killers we've had enough."

Ducret spoke for the first time, his half-shuttered eyes on Sumner. The words dripped from his mouth almost in a murmur. "Some other day—soon."

A light step sounded on the sidewalk. Julia walked into the bank. Sensitive to atmospheres, she was instantly aware of a tensity close to the breaking point. Wisely she disregarded this. "Saw you through the window and wanted to remind you of your appointment with John," he told her father.

He grunted a surly acknowledgment.

JULIA wondered what had brought these men into the same room. Certainly it was not a peace conference. Lightly, to relieve the strain, she said, "Don't let me interrupt this happy reunion."

Anse snorted angrily. "We're gettin' out of here."

The girl's glance touched Randolph and rested on him. A clamor of the blood born of physical urge drew her toward him and repelled her. No other man had ever stirred her so. This angered her and she wanted to trample it down. She kept telling herself that he was a pest, a trouble breeder, and an insolent outlaw, but she knew she did not believe it. His smile, ironic and cool, annoyed her. It discounted her arrogant pride, as if she were a child in a tantrum.

Her self-willed beauty was amazingly vital, Randolph thought. She is all fire and passion. If she loved a man she would keep him either in heaven or hell.

"You're not interrupting, Miss Cottrell," he said. "We have come to a complete understanding."

Anse Cottrell's fingers closed on the arm of his daughter and forced her to keep pace with him to the door.

As soon as they were out of hearing she asked, "What did he mean by saying you have reached an understanding?"

"Never mind what he meant." His voice was thick with rage. "Keep out of this. He's made his choice. The man is as good as dead."

"No," she cried. "You can't do that to him. I won't have it."

Cottrell had not meant to say so much. He had let anger sweep away discretion. It had been an unwise threat and he covered it with an explanation. "Don't try to bully me, you little fool. I'm not going to harm him. But he has declared war on Duff and his friends. They'll never let him live after his repeated attacks on them. I told him to leave—begged him to go. He's gone crazy, he and his brother both. They'll shoot their way into graves."

Julia did not more than half believe him. She begged her father to serve notice on Duff that there must be no more killing but Anse stormed her into silence. He had done all he could for the

Sloans but they were bad and violent men. He would not lift another hand for them.

The banker watched the Cottrells leave, a worried frown on his face. "Anse is going to make trouble for you."

"Nothing new about that," Sumner mentioned bitterly. "He's been doing that for nearly twenty years."

Before the day was over Webber knew that Cottrell was beginning his renewed attack on the Sloans by a poisor campaign. Three men at different times told him they had heard Randy Sloan had paid off one of his mortgage notes with money stolen at the Blue Creek stage robbery a year earlier.

After leaving the bank the brothers moved along the sidewalk to Stump's store in front of which their mounts were tied to a hitch rack. Already word had spread that they had been seen going into the bank a few minutes later than Cottrell and Ducret. Men in stores and saloons on the square had been waiting with tense excitement for the crash of guns. Now curious gazes rested on the tall lean-flanked ranchmen whose craggy faces told them nothing. There was a driving force in their long reaching strides. A month ago the Sloans had been a whipped outfit. Round Top was not so sure of that any longer. A lot of guns had hammered at them since then and they were still alive and there was talk that their kin and former supporters were rallying to aid them.

As they jiggled out of town at a road gait, they discussed what had just taken place.

"We're lucky to be out of it alive," Randolph said. "I felt right uneasy."

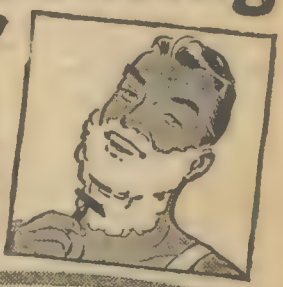
"Me too. That slit-eyed son of a gun Ducret was itchin' to turn loose his cutter on us. We sure had luck he didn't, seeing how you and Old Anse were cussin' each other out."

"I had to talk back to him after he began but two-three times I was scared smoke was going to bust loose."

"You took a lot from him when he claimed you were in the Blue Creek hold-up," Sumner said.

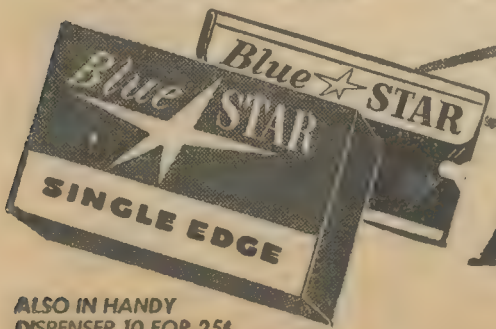
[*Turn page*]

A Dollar's Worth of Shaving Pleasure *for a Dime!*



Smoother, easier, faster shaves every time because Blue Star Blades are ground and honed in oil

Try a Blue Star Blade on hard-to-shave spots. See how much shaving pleasure it gives you for so little money. Shave and save with Blue Star today.



ONLY 10¢ A PACKAGE

ALSO IN HANDY DISPENSER 10 FOR 25¢

Blue STAR

SINGLE EDGE DOUBLE EDGE

PRECISION ASR PRODUCTS

AMERICAN SAFETY RAZOR CORP., BROOKLYN 1, N.Y.

"I took more than you know." The younger brother drew from his pocket the cancelled note and handed it to Sumner.

"Why didn't you show me this?" he demanded. "The old wolf was asking for war."

"Yes, he was crazy mad for the moment. But he didn't really want it, not after he had written it. If I had showed it to you, then some of us would have been dead in ten seconds."

"You have to turn this note in at the courthouse to get the mortgage release. Everybody in town will know what he called you and that we took it like whipped curs."

Randolph disagreed "They'll know Anse and not us is on the prod."

VI

LATER Anse found John Bancroft at the courthouse discussing with the county assessor an adjustment of the Sure Fire taxes. The old man took a chair and waited impatiently for them to finish. Payment on the mortgage note had been a blow to him, a totally unexpected one. It meant not only an obstacle to his taking over the Bigg's Bend properties but stressed also the revival of the Sloan power. Anse had not become the dominant man in the community without making enemies and stirring jealousies. That he had ridden roughshod over the rights of others made little difference to him so long as his supremacy was unchallenged but already he could see on the faces of men he met sly smiles of satisfaction at the issue of the gunfight between his adherents and the Sloans.

Bancroft finished his business and walked with Cottrell out of the courthouse.

"Julia says you have something important to tell me," Anse mentioned.

"Yes. When I'm sure we're alone." Bancroft turned toward Knob Hill, a sugarloaf butte rising from the end of Jeff Davis Street.

They were half way up it before he stopped.

"I had a letter this morning from my uncle Miles Hancock," he said. "This is an absolute secret. I'm in on it only because of certain arrangements I have to make for him at Chrysolite. It is decided that the railroad is to come by way of Bigg's Bend and that there will be a division point there. Better get hold of the Sloan property before they get wise."

"Fine," Cottrell answered bitterly. "Half an hour ago they paid off the mortgage note on the home property."

"Thought they were poor as church mice."

"I'm satisfied this was some of the money stolen at the Blue Creek stage robbery. There is no other way they could have got it."

"All right. Arrest young Randolph. You have evidence against him. To be convicted of a stage robbery would take some of the cock-a-doodle-do out of that young man."

"Suits me fine. Trouble is that Duff is so unpopular a lot of softheaded fools are making heroes out of the Sloans. I couldn't convict him."

"Then buy them out, but move quick before they hear the railroad is coming their way. I'll go fifty-fifty with you on the deal."

"They are stubborn as Dutchmen and won't sell."

Anse knew what he had to do but he did not intend to discuss it with Bancroft, and before he made the final move he must build up a situation discrediting the Sloans with the public. A plan was already in his mind. It would take perfect timing and there must be left no loose ends to unravel. He had to depend on Duff again. Ducret would not touch a business like this, which was a pity since he was so much more efficient than Dan. The Texan had a queer stiff pride. He was absolutely honest and any fighting he did had to be in the open.

That night Anse drove out to the Duff ranch. The place lay in a fold of the hills within easy riding distance of the big Slash C ranch owned by Cottrell where he and his family had lived until they moved to town a few years earlier.

In Cottrell's mind there was no doubt that Duff preyed on his stock, rustling calves from the Slash C as he did from the Bigg's Bend spread. This galled Anse greatly, but in spite of his thrift he had to put up with it because Duff was so useful to him. Whenever he had a piece of dirty work to be done Dan was willing to take over for a price. He was a handy man to have around to burn a nester's cabin, do an occasional killing, or perform any other chore outside the law.

As to rustling Cottrell's stock the big man made no bones about it but told him with profane glee that this was part of the pay for services rendered since Cottrell was so niggardly with his money. He always said this with a sneer and though Anse quarreled with him about it he made no effort to press the charges.

The clump of buildings and the yard littered with worn-out tools and ramshackle vehicles made an ugly splash in the pretty cove backed against the rock wall of a ridge. A light showed in the one-room log cabin of the ranchman.

BEFORE descending from the saucer rim, Anse made sure of an easy draw from the holster at his side. Duff was a hot-tempered man quick on the trigger and of late he had been unusually restive in his relations with Cottrell. Neither of them liked the other. Only the fact that the alliance was profitable to both held them together.

Cottrell drew up fifty yards from the cabin and yelled, "Hello the house!" Duff had heard the grinding of the wheels coming down the slope of disintegrated granite and already had a rifle in his hands. He called back, "Who's there?"

Anse gave his name and drove forward. The big man in the doorway asked gruffly, "What brought you here?"

"I've got a little information you might like to have," Cottrell replied, and added drily, "I haven't heard you say, 'Light and come in.'"

"All right, I'm saying it," Duff tossed at him, as if it were a bone to a dog.

Anse tied and walked into the house. It looked like a rat's nest. The bed had not been made and the blankets were soiled. Boots, underwear, a broken bridle, torn newspapers, dirty dishes, and cooking utensils containing scraps of food littered the room. The floor was of puncheon and looked as if it had never been swept. Duff flung a pair of muddy jeans from a chair to the bed.

"Sit," he said. "I'm sure grateful to you for bringing me this information whatever it is. I got few friends filled with such loving kindness."

The older man ignored the sarcasm. He had not come to wrangle.

"You'd have a better light if you cleaned that lamp chimney," he said mildly, looking at the glass blackened by the flame.

"Suits me the way it is," Duff retorted. "If that's what you came for, you drove a dang long way to tell me."

"Now Dan, don't go off half cocked," the old man reproved him amiably. "We been friends a long time and that's how I want it."

Duff's splenetic laughter mocked his guest. "Friends! You haven't got one in the world any more than I have. You're out for yourself, you old vinegaroon. Cut the guff and come clean."

Cottrell shook his head in discouragement. "You live alone too much, Dan, and it makes you crotchety. Folks are kinder than you think. I'm here to drop a hint how you might pick up a nice little wad of dough."

"Yeah," Duff scoffed. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

Anse leaned forward and tapped the table with a finger as he talked. "The Sure Fire pay roll for two weeks comes in Thursday on the Blue Creek stage. It ought to net you a good deal more than when you held it up last year. You did a good job then. This pay roll money might as well be yours if you are slick about it."

"Where do you come in on it?"

"I don't. The take is all yours and the boys who work with you."

Duff glared at him. "You've got some scheme in your noodle. Spit it out."

"Only this. You've been getting off on the wrong foot in these attacks on the Sloans. Result is, folks have been turning against us. Leave me to handle the Sloans. When the time's right—and it will be soon—I'll take care of them. Pull off this hold-up like you did the other, leaving evidence that it is a Sloan job. I've been laying the groundwork so folks will believe they did it to get money to pay off their mortgages. Once people are convinced they are outlaws the general opinion will be that it is better for the district that they be rubbed out."

Duff grudgingly agreed. He could feel his neighbors edging away from him. He was quite willing to leave the Sloans to Anse provided the old man acted before the enemy clan made a move to collect Duff's scalp.

THEIR heads together across the table, the two talked over details of the proposed hold-up. Three men would be enough. They could stop the stage while it was passing through the rocky defile of Randall's Gap. That would be just after darkness had fallen. The road-agents need not be away from home more than three hours. As before, they were to make the play that they were from the Sloan ranch.

Anse went out to his buggy and brought back with him a weather-beaten hat.

"You ought to be acquainted with this," he chuckled.

Duff stared at it, the slaty eyes in his ugly face bulging with a dawning surprise. He pointed at the two small bullet holes in the crown.

"You mean—that this is Randy Sloan's hat?" he gulped out.

"Right first crack, Dan." Cottrell grinned.

"How did you get it?"

"I paid Shifty Fox twenty dollars to slip into the house at the Bigg's Bend and get it while all of them were out at work."

"What am I to do with it?"

"Leave it at the entrance to the Gap while you are making your getaway. It has his initials stamped on the band."

"Sure Shifty won't talk?"

"Dead sure. I can send him to the pen by lifting a finger."

Anse went over the whole plot again covering every contingency likely to occur. Before he left the plan was as fool proof as he could make it.

VII

MORG VANCE lifted his wrinkled face and squinted up into a blue sky flecked by a few mackerel clouds. "Going to rain tonight," he said. "I killed a snake and hung it up."

Randolph tightened the saddle cinch and swung into the hull. He smiled at the old-timer. Morgan was full of superstitions.

"It hasn't rained in six weeks," he suggested.

"That's right. We can use a gully-washer plenty. My bones feel it hatchin'. . . . Keep your eyes peeled, son, if you're droppin' in at the store."

"Sure," Sloan promised.

Morg's advice was superfluous. Randy knew that more than most men he existed on an indefinite tenure of life, very likely dependent on a constant vigilance. Like many men of the open frontier he had a sixth sense of danger, an awareness to fugitive impressions. The print of a hoof on a little-used trail, the rumor of a sound carried to him by the wind, the tang of unexpected smoke in the nostrils, the startled flight of birds; these might stir him to instant alertness.

The sun's rays were streaming across the greasewood and heat waves rose from the desert sand. A killdeer flung out its noisy note. In the distance a small bunch of antelope flitted through the brush. The arid land was showing its smiling face, but he knew that life on it was a war. The plants had protective barbs and the reptiles poisonous stings. They struggled for enough water to keep them alive. He wondered if from the days of the cave man the human race too had always had to fight to save itself from extinction.

As he rode up to the Cross Roads

store he noted three horses at the hitch-rack. One of them was a sorrel and carried the Circle D brand. A black with white stockings belonged to LePage. Invisible fingers clutched at his stomach and twisted it into a knot. The men must be watching him from the store. If he remounted to ride away, their bullets would tear into his body. He had to walk into the store and show no sign of fear.

The men inside saw him tie his mount with a slip knot, take from the breast pocket of his shirt a sack of tobacco, and roll a cigarette before he sauntered forward.

"He knows we are here," LePage said. He was a long lean man with eyes set too closely in a sour ugly face.

"Sure. From the horses." Duff looked irritably at a homesteader's wife who was buying airtights, flour, and Arbuckle's coffee. If they went too far, she would be a witness against them.

Watching Sloan's unhurried approach, the third man muttered, "He's got sand in his craw." The fellow was Homer Bascom, a nester under grave suspicion of being a rustler. His brow above heavy-lidded eyes was always lifted in what seemed to be perplexity. Other men made up his mind for him.

At the doorway Randolph showed an undisturbed surprise. He nodded casually at the men and turned to the woman. "Nice to see you, Mrs. Frisby," he said, and meant it, for in her presence there would probably be no gun smoke.

She smiled at him. Most women liked Randy Sloan. "You don't often get up our way," she said.

The storekeeper Gauss was frightened. In this situation there was dynamite. "I reckon you want your mail, Randy," he blurted. To the young man he brought a letter and two newspapers.

Sloan leaned against a counter and glanced over the first page of the *Round Top News*. "Quite a piece in the paper about you-all, Dan," he said cheerfully. "Seems you were attacked on the plaza by a gang of miscreants who infest this neck of the territory." There was a derisive grin on his leanjawed face. He handed the paper to Duff.

The big ruffian tore the sheets in two and stamped on them. "You'll talk yourself into a wooden overcoat," he growled. "I've had enough of you."

Gauss began to talk hurriedly to Mrs. Frisby about the wisdom of laying in a stock of airtights before the price went up.

Mrs. Frisby was not listening to him. A chill had swept over her. Her eyes shifted from Duff to young Sloan. She thought, If I leave, they will kill him. She said hurriedly, "If you are going home, Randy, you can ride with me far as the cut-off."

"We'll all ride with you, Mrs. Frisby," Duff put in promptly.

Randy's stomach muscles tightened. Duff had served notice they were not going to let him escape. "I'll stick around here a while," he told the woman. It came to him that unless Duff was a complete fool he would not force a killing here before witnesses. He could do better later.

LEPAGE moved toward the front of the store, his long body tilting forward as the spurs scuffed the floor. A slight lift of his head beckoned Duff to join him. They whispered together. Duff listened sulkily, then moved away.

"All right—all right!" he broke out impatiently. "But nobody's going to prevent me from beating him to a rag doll." He straddled up to Sloan. "Will you take it here or outside?" he demanded.

The man was a notorious barroom brawler and strong as an ox. He had whipped a dozen men with his fists.

"Better beat me up outside or you'll ruin the store," Randolph decided. "Guns left in here with Gauss of course."

"I don't need a gun to bust you in two," the bully boasted.

The difference in weight between the two must have been nearly forty pounds and Duff was built solid as a concrete post.

"Dan will whale the stuffin' out of him, don't you reckon?" Bascom said.

"Chew him up and spit him out," LePage predicted.

Duff came in flatfooted, swinging hard. He had the lumbering awkwardness and power of a bear. Randy sidestepped and the blow went past his shoulder as his right drove to the belly of the attacker. The big man's grunt was good news to him. It showed that the fellow's midriff, once heavy and hard with muscle like a band of steel, had softened from years of heavy drinking.

Swiftly Randy danced away. He knew he could not slug it out and he dared not run the risk of having those great arms girdle his body. It was to his advantage that he was a good boxer. He moved with the ease and grace of a trained athlete. His long flat muscles had the rhythmic flow of a piston rod. But he realized his one chance of victory was in winding Duff and letting him wear himself out.

Duff swarmed all over him, heavy fists hammering at face and body. He lashed out wildly, scorning defense, to finish this quickly. Only Randy's skill in boxing and his swift foot work saved him. Some of the blows he took on his elbows and arms, some he ducked. One hurled him back against the wall of a store room. Already his face was bruised and bleeding.

Though Duff's breathing was deep and fast, he charged at once. Randy ducked into the open and backed away. The big fellow's arms were working like the fans of a windmill. A swinging right caught Randy on the cheek and sent him spinning. He was up quartering over the ground for safety before Duff could reach him. Though dizzy, he survived the next two or three minutes and felt strength flowing back into him.

Duff relaxed, panting for air, but he kept moving forward. A flailing blow grazed Randy's cheek and he countered with a right to the kidneys. Before Duff had recovered he smashed two more into the man's stomach. The man winced and tried to close with him. Randy ducked out of reach and came back fast with a blow to the eye, all the power of his body back of it.

Again Duff plunged at him. He was telegraphing his blows now, wild looping haymakers flung out with no precision. He was blowing like a porpoise. Randy plowed half a dozen blows into his belly and took in return a clout that flung him to the ground. But once more he was up and out of danger before his enemy could reach him. Duff lumbered after him. He stopped to rip out a curse and demand that Sloan stand and fight.

Randy obliged. He shifted the attack to the man's face, pumping blows that stung and left red bruises. Both of Duff's eyes were swollen, the left one nearly closed. His legs were giving way and the arms so heavy he could scarcely move them fast enough to protect himself against the jolting jabs he was helpless to ward off. Again Randy concentrated on the panting belly.

For the first time Duff gave ground. Sloan saw in the man's eyes that the fear of defeat was riding him. The fury of his baffled rage distorted even more his cut and bleeding face. He groaned when first one fist and then the other slammed into the tire of fat spreading across his soft paunch. His enormous stamina had been sapped by dissipation.

But he shuffled forward on legs that could hardly carry his weight. Randy measured the blow carefully and flung it to the point of the chin. Duff's legs buckled. He swayed and then collapsed. The big body rolled over and he lay still, not senseless but unable to rise.

Randy leaned against a wall, his breath coming with difficulty. He was exhausted, and his face was a map of wheals, cuts, and purpling bruises. In a few hours he would be, he knew, a mass of aches.

Bascom screwed his face into its perpetual bewilderment. "I'll never see anything like this again," he said. "I didn't think there was a guy in Arizona could do it."

RANDY walked into the store to recover his revolver. Mrs. Frisby looked at his battered face and said, "You poor dear."

It hurt Randy to grin but he did it. "Keep some sympathy for the other fellow too," he suggested.

She said, with feminine ferocity, "I hope you nearly killed him."

Randy did not comment on that. "I'll ride with you now to the cut-off," he told her.

Duff was getting painfully to his feet when they left. He did not lift his eyes to them. For the present all the bounce was out of the man. He was whipped in spirit more than in body. A deep humiliation depressed him. It had been his boast that no man he had ever met could beat him in a fight, and this boy had hammered him till he was helpless. The shame of it would be a corroding poison in him until he got his revenge.

Randy found no comfort in his victory. He had hoped that when Sumner came home, the feud dormant, they could build a new life of peace and order. But it was not to be that way.

Morg was shoeing a horse when he rode into the yard. He took one glance at the young man and dropped the animal's hoof.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" He asked. "You been tanglin' with a grizzly."

"Had a little trouble with Duff at the store."

Sumner joined them. "He jumped you and beat you up."

"Yes and no. We had a fight."

Randy told the story.

Morg's eyes danced. "You whipped the big windjammer."

"He whipped himself standing at a bar drinking for about fifteen years."

Sumner brought his fist down on a wagon tire. "I've had all I'm going to take. Next move Old Anse or his gunmen make somebody is going out in smoke."

Randy said glumly, "Anse has hardly started yet."

VIII

WITH the speed of wildfire the news spread that the stage had been robbed again and a passenger badly wounded. Bancroft and his uncle Miles Hancock were on it at the time. With the others inside the coach they had been stood in a line and searched after the strong box had been robbed. If the driver, Main, or the shotgun messenger, Cleland, recognized any of the masked bandits they kept silent about it. Since they would be riding the route every day it would be dangerous for them to know too much. The wounded man was a Kentuckian. He had resisted search and been shot in the side.

As before, all the surface evidence pointed to the Bigg's Bend outfit as the criminals. One of the outlaws limped. The tracks of the robbers' horses led straight to the Sloan ranch and were lost within a mile of the house in the water of a small creek. The clinching evidence was Randolph's hat. Bancroft had noticed that the hat of the leader had two bullet holes in it. The hat itself, with the initials R S stamped in the band, was found in a draw through which the outlaws passed after the holdup. Somebody caught sight of the bandits and to avoid recognition they had dashed away at a gallop, one of them losing his hat.

Anse Cottrell was full of indignant zeal. This was an outrageous shame, a blot on the fair name of the county. His indignation took him into saloons and stores wherever a knot of men were gathered. The outlaw nest at Bigg's Bend ought to be rubbed out. With Sheriff Walsh he did not waste any oratory. That official had been chosen by him and was his man. Walsh was a plump soft politician and when Cottrell told him to arrest the Sloans and bring them to town he did not like the assignment. His instinct was to avoid trouble. The last thing he wanted was to tangle with a tough bunch like the Sloans.

"We ain't hardly got enough on them, Anse," he protested.

"Do you want one of them to come and tell you he did it?" Anse jeered. "Plain fact is you haven't the nerve to go get them."

"Don't rawhide me. I'm trying to figure what's best to do. I don't want any of my boys killed."

"Meaning Pete Walsh."

"If I was plumb sure they had done it I would go after them."

"You'll go after them anyhow—or be a two spot in this town the rest of yore life. I'll see to that." Cottrell softened this with a piece of confidential information. "It's mighty important for the community you do, Pete. I'll tell you why. Miles Hancock is the big mogul of the Overland Railroad and he's out here now at Chrysolite. He was on the stage that was robbed. One of the bandits took the old gent's plug hat and shot it full of holes. He's sore as billy-be-damn and about ready to change the route and cut us off completely. We've got to show him this district doesn't stand for such lawlessness by arresting *pronto* the road-agents. Take a big posse and surprise the Sloans. Get the drop on them and they won't fight."

"Easy for you to sit here on your behind and say that. They'll fight at the drop of the hat. How big a posse had I better take?"

They chose eight deputies, none of them any of Cottrell's kin. The old man explained this must not look like any part of a personal vendetta.

In the early afternoon the posse reached the Bigg's Bend ranch. The lawmen came up cautiously over a hill, to see Randy and Morg driving a bunch of calves into a pasture back of the house. Apparently Sumner and Tim Jolly were not at home, though a saddled horse was tied to the corral fence.

Watching the sheriff's party approach Morg volunteered one word. "Trouble."

By way of greeting Walsh said, "No use you getting annoyed, Randy, for I've got to arrest you-all."

"What for?" asked Randy. It was an unnecessary question. He had heard of the stage robbery and felt sure the Sloans were being picked for the robbers.

"For holding up the Blue Creek stage."

Randy did not protest innocence. He said, "Have you a warrant?"

The sheriff produced one. It called for the arrest of Sumner Sloan, Randolph Sloan, and Morgan Vance for the robbery of the Blue Creek stage.

"A frame-up," Randy said. "We can prove we weren't there."

THE face of Walsh set to a sneer. His mind was easier since it was clear young Sloan did not mean to fight. To remove any impression any of the posse might have as to his gameness he decided to get tough.

"You're guilty, Sloan. We've got the goods on you." He snapped a question at his prisoner. "Where is Sum at?"

Randy looked steadily at him. "I reckon Anse will have to be content with two of us for this gather."

"Anse hasn't got a thing to do with this," the sheriff blustered. "I'm the law. Just keep that in mind."

Morg had dismounted to open a gate. He limped across to the sheriff and stared belligerently up at him from beneath the wide low-crowned hat set at a defiant angle. "What Randy is too polite to say to you is that you have to ask Anse can you blow your nose."

A pimply-faced boy in the posse tittered. The sheriff's pink face reddened.

"That kind of talk don't make friends with me," he said angrily.

Morg flung back an answer instantly, scorn in his chirpy voice. "Who the hell wants to be friends with a putty man?" The eyes in his leathery wrinkled face raked the posse. "A bunch of drug store Bill Hickoks certain. Nine of you, all loaded down with saddle guns and garnished with hoglegs. It don't look like so few of you heroes will be safe. Better have Anse call out the militia."

"Take his gun from him, Bill," ordered Walsh, speaking to one of his deputies. "If he makes a move we'll cut him down."

"Hands up, Morg," Randy said quickly. "We're not resisting arrest. They won't have that excuse to kill us."

"You know doggoned well we're not aiming to kill you," the exasperated sheriff retorted. "I'm here to uphold the law." He turned to the posse after the Bigg's Bend men had been disarmed.

"Bill, you and Cy stay with me to guard the prisoners. The rest of you search the place thorough."

Randy exchanged a glance with Morg. Sumner had left not more than an hour ago to see their uncle Crawford about building a small irrigation ditch, but Tim Jolly was somewhere about the place. He had just finished shoeing a horse when the posse appeared, but had stepped somewhere out of sight.

"Shifty, take Chad with you and go through the house," Walsh ordered. "Don't miss a thing. Maybe you'll find some evidence there."

Randy picked the fuzzy-faced boy from the group. "You go along with them, Bob, and see they don't manufacture that evidence," he said.

"I'm runnin' this posse," the sheriff cried. "You go where I told you, Bob."

Those searching the outbuildings returned and reported that they had found nobody, though there was a fire at the forge showing that somebody had been working there recently. Shifty Fox came out of the house waving a piece of black cloth with two eye holes cut in it.

"Found the mask one of them was wearing," he cried. "Stuck away in a closet back of a lot of stuff."

Morg exploded. "Knew this was a frame-up. Knew it all the time. Nobody ever trusted Shifty Fox far as he could throw a two-year-old by the tail. He wouldn't of been put on a posse except to pull off some dirty trick."

"Pay no attention to the old windbag," Walsh said. "I'm leaving six of you boys here to pick up Sumner and Tim Jolly when they show up. The rest of us will take the prisoners to town."

From the hayloft Jolly watched them go. He had been concealed under the hay when one of the posse had come up the ladder and taken a hurried look. If anybody had chanced to be there, the searcher did not want to find him. The fellow's gun might start smoking.

Tim knew he had to get word to Sumner before his return that men were waiting at the ranch to capture him. The problem was how to get away with six men hanging around the place. His saddled horse was tied to the corral fence not forty yards from the barn but under the guns of the posse men he could not possibly reach it. He would not get a dozen steps before they cut him down. No plan he could think of would get those six out of the yard.

AS the minutes dragged into hours and the sun began to sink toward the hills his anxiety increased. Sumner would be coming home soon and the probability was that when the order came for him to surrender he would reach for a gun and go down with half a dozen bullets in him.

Two or three of the men wandered into the house and presently smoke rose from the chimney. Tim guessed they were preparing a meal. After what seemed an interminable time a man appeared in the doorway and called "Come and get it." The others trooped into the house with the exception of one slim young fellow.

That it was now or never Tim knew. He had to take his chance with the one left on guard. From the door of the barn he peered out. The posse man on guard was Bob Watson. He was sitting on the corral fence about a rope's length from the saddled horse. His eyes were for the moment on the calves in the pasture.

Tim raced for the corral, his .45 out. Bob turned his head, startled eyes on the runner. Jolly did not fire. He wanted to delay that till he was forced to it, since the sound of the explosion would bring those inside boiling out. The kid did not lift the scatter gun from his knees. Tim thought he was petrified with fear until he spoke.

"I'm for you," the kid said. "Light a shuck."

Tim was never more surprised. He pulled the slip knot, vaulted into the saddle, swung the bronco around, and was off. The boy's gun roared twice, but not before the rider was fifty yards away. He had fired into the air.

Men crowded out of the doorway like seeds from a squeezed orange. They did

not immediately see the galloping horse.

"What in blazes?" a man shouted.

"I missed him," Bob said.

The guns drummed, the sound of them crashing together. It was only a second before Tim disappeared over a rise in the road. They rushed for their mounts which were in the corral, some of them unsaddled, the others with loosened cinches.

"Comes of bringing a kid along," a flatfaced heavy-set man growled as he swung to the saddle.

Tim was out of sight long before they reached the rise where they had last seen him. He had vanished into the roll of small hills which led to the range in the distance. They searched for an hour and found no trace of him.

"He's high-tailin' to warn Sum," the chief deputy said gloomily. "Pete will sure read us the riot act."

"Not me, he won't," another man differed. "It was his job to stay here himself and collect Sumner, but he's so dad-gummed gun-shy he beat it to town and left us the chore to do. Personally I don't like the setup. I get along with the Sloans all right. Let Old Anse kill his own wolves."

Since there was no use waiting at the ranch any longer they set out for town.

IX

ONCE the arrests had been made Sheriff Walsh took no chance of losing his prisoners. Both of them were handcuffed and as a further precaution ropes fastened to their waists were tied to the saddle horns of deputies.

"Better hogtie us," jeered Morg. "No tellin' what desperate criminals like us will do."

As they jogged down the road Sloan put a question to the deputy beside him, a man named McHenry. "The way we heard it a passenger on the stage was hurt. How bad is the wound?"

The posse-man looked at him angrily. "Doc Jones says he won't live till morning. You'd better pray he does."

McHenry had taken no part in the feud. Though Randolph did not know him very well the two had always been casually friendly. It was a shock to find that he had already decided on the guilt of the Sloans. It showed a shift in opinion on the part of the people.

"Any evidence against us?" Randolph inquired.

"Plenty," McHenry answered sharply. "Like it was the other time. One of the gang limped. Your hat was identified by the bullet holes in it. The trail of the robbers led straight to your ranch. And we just found one of the masks in your house. You got away with the first stage holdup, but you can't do it twice."

"Careless, weren't we?" Randolph said. "I wear a hat anybody can identify. We don't take the trouble to cover our tracks, and knowing that we'll be suspected we leave a mask lying about the house. Looks like we're plumb fools for sure."

McHenry's gaze held to the prisoner, a doubt stirring in his mind. He had sympathized with this young fellow, driven to violence by involvement in the family tragedy, but his lenience did not include toleration of robbery and murder.

"Your hat, isn't it?"

"If it is the hat Duff punctured I haven't seen it for a week. I'll bet Anse Cottrell knows who was wearing it."

The sheriff slewed around in the saddle. "Cut out the talk back there," he ordered.

McHenry flung back a sharp retort. "I'll talk when I please. Don't try to ride herd on my tongue."

The lethargy of a hot afternoon rested on Round Top as they rode into the town but before they reached the jail the town had awakened. News of their arrival had spread and the streets were alive with curious and furious spectators. They poured out of stores and saloons and the courthouse. Randolph felt anger beat against him like a violent wind.

He saw Nora standing at the door of her shop, fear written on her white face. She took a step or two down the path but stopped when Randolph shook his head. From Stump's store Duff and

LePage appeared, the face of the former still wearing the scars of the beating he had received. He straddled to the edge of the sidewalk, to shake his big fist at Sloan and shout a jubilant threat.

"You're going to be strung up tonight, you killer. That hill-billy you shot died an hour ago."

LePage made his contribution. "Looks like this will be quite a night, boys."

Randolph felt a cold crawling in his stomach. His enemies had stacked the cards and dealt him an unplayable hand.

The doors of the jail closed behind the prisoners. They were locked in a room on the second story. The handcuffs were not removed.

Morg sat on a cot, a troubled frown on his homely puckered face. "We're sure enough in a tight, Randy," he said. "I plumb don't like it."

"Nor I," Randy agreed. He paced the floor. "Anse fixed up this slick job. He was wagon boss in this town and county but he began to get worried at the shape of things. So he has ticketed us a pair of murdering bandits to be rubbed out quick. He won't fool around sending us to the pen like he did Sum. That was a mistake he won't repeat."

"That drug store posse will get Sum too," the old man prophesied. "If Sum shows fight they will cut him down."

"Unless Tim gets word to him."

"How can he, with six men roostin' there in the yard?"

RANDOLPH walked to the barred window and looked out. Lifting his eyes, he could see a patch of blue sky and the sun on its way down to the range behind which it would soon set. It came to his mind that this might be the last time he would ever see its rays streaming across the tips of the greasewood.

"We got our tails in a crack sure," Morg said, "but maybe somebody will open the door and let us loose."

"You ought to be cussin' me out," Randolph told his old friend.

"Sho, boy, nothing to that." The old-timer chewed tobacco steadily.

The first street lights were coming on when the prisoners saw the second detachment of the sheriff's posse coming down the street. In front of the Empire saloon the sheriff met the group. He put a question and a deputy answered at length. Walsh cut off the explanation angrily. Others of the posse joined in the talk. The officer turned his back on them and walked into the saloon.

"They didn't get our boys," Morg said excitedly. "Tim must of slipped off and warned Sum. They sure bungled that job. Sum won't sit quiet and let a mob get us."

Randolph did not say what was in his mind, that Sumner would probably arrive too late. His thoughts ran over the turbulent years that had brought him to this. The bloodshed had been none of his seeking. It was a pattern of life forced on him when he was a boy.

Morgan Vance joined him at the window and looked down at the growing excitement in the street. The town buzzed with activity like a swarm of hiving bees. Voices from below shouted threats at them. More than once they caught sight of Duff and LePage, each the center of a small group.

"They are doing their best to put ropes around our necks," Morg said bitterly. "I haven't seen that devil Anse anywhere."

"He's staying away from the ruckus but with his finger right on the trigger, Morg. If this works out the way he wants it he'll spend tomorrow deploring all over town the unhappy fate we brought on ourselves."

"Once I had my Winchester lined up on him and your father made me lay off. Greatest mistake we ever made—both of us."

"We never learn that you can't fight murderous scoundrels by letting them always get the jump on us."

"Looks like all the riff-raff in the county is in the street. They are getting crazier by the minute. I don't see any decent folks there."

"The good people won't lift a hand for us because they think we killed the passenger on the stage."

The sound of a piano in a honkytonk reached them.

"Blind Jim in the Palace playin'," Morgan said. "I've had some good times in that joint. There was a girl there named Belle I took quite a fancy to. She up and married a muleskinner named Starr. I disremember his first name. They moved to Globe. Last year I bumped into her there. She had took on considerable weight. Seems there's a constellation of little Starrs now."

Randolph backed the old-timer's attempt at cheerfulness. "If you had married her yourself instead of raising hell you might have raised a crop of cherubs," he suggested.

"And been a deacon in the church like Old Anse."

At the sight of Randolph Sloan, a handcuffed prisoner, a wave of fear had swept over Nora Hamilton. He was once more in deep trouble, and this time without the sympathy of the town back of him. She was appalled at the vehemence of the anger beating on him. That LePage and Duff should show their exultant hatred was to be expected, but she saw good citizens joining in it.

As the afternoon wore into evening her spirits sank lower. There was a great deal of drinking. The shuffling of men's feet on the sidewalk was almost constant. A good many did not go home for supper but instead ate crackers and cheese bought at a store. They did not want to miss anything. Fragments of talk came to her. Fellows like the Sloans were better dead. They had been involved in trouble for twenty years. Now they had gone too far.

Old Matt Chunn hobbled into the shop. He was worried and showed it. "I don't like the way things are shaping, Miss Nora. Randy's enemies are awful busy stirring folks up. If I wasn't a million years old, maybe I could do something."

The young woman lifted a face, gray and drawn. "You don't mean—" She let the sentence die unfinished.

"I'm skeered," he said. "Them wolves mean to get him sure."

"But Sheriff Walsh. He'll keep Randy in the jail."

"Walsh won't fight a lick. If a mob gits going it will bust the jail wide open. Somebody is payin' for free drinks. The scalawags are wilding up."

NORA felt a cold wind blow through her. It was a terrible thought that Randy might be going to lose the life that was so strong and quick in him, that the light in his gay eyes would be blotted out forever. His talk had made it clear to her how much he had loved the physical world. It might be that never again would he know the feel of a saddle between his muscular thighs or the comfort of dropping to sleep before a campfire with the night crowding in, the stars near, and the shadowy hills reaching to the sky.

What could she do to help him, a lone woman and one without influence? Outside of Matt Chunn she had no friends in town, except perhaps Bill and Julia Cottrell. Bill had been nice to her and had dropped into the store to see her two or three times, but he had gone to Chrysolite as manager of his father's ore freighting business. Maybe Julia could get old Anse to intervene. Somebody ought to ride out to the ranch and tell Sumner Sloan of his brother's danger.

After Matt had gone Nora could no longer sit alone with her fears. She flung a cloak over her white dress, put out the lamp, and walked out into the packed street. At night Round Top was a man's town and this evening more so than usual. No other woman was to be seen. As she hurried down the sidewalk she was aware of curious glances turned her way, but nobody spoke to her until Dan Duff bumped into her as he came out of the Empire saloon.

"If you're lookin' for your fancy man, he's got another engagement tonight," he jeered.

Nora knew he had been drinking heavily. He teetered on his feet and his big body swayed. She tried to pass him but he deliberately blocked the way.

"What's your hurry? You'll be needing another man now."

A flat hard voice said, "You will

apologize to Miss Hamilton at once."

A man had stepped from the road to the sidewalk. He was small and slender, but his narrowed eyes rested on Duff and seemed to freeze him. The jubilation went out of the fellow's face as the light from a blown candle.

"Now Cully, all I said was—"

Ducret cut his explanation short. "I heard what you said. Say your piece. Tell her you are a liar and a bully and you're swallowing the insult."

Filled with liquor though he was, Duff's throat went dry. The small Texan had not raised his voice. His hand had not moved toward a weapon. But the big ruffian knew how incredibly swift was his draw. Several men were watching the scene from a little distance. Duff's glance moved over them and found no help there, though LePage was one of them. He had to work this out alone—to fight or to humiliate himself. He gulped down a lump in his throat.

"I was jest funnin', Cully. Didn't mean a thing. Honest, I—"

Again Ducret interrupted. "Talk to Miss Hamilton and not to me—and make it good."

Duff's words stumbled one over another. "I don't aim ever to annoy a lady, Miss Hamilton. Like I said, I was foolin'. I'm sure sorry. Fact is, I been drinkin', and I ain't quite responsible. Maybe I wasn't exactly polite."

"Keep right on. You're not thorough enough." In Ducret's low voice was an icy coldness. The drunken man felt the threat as clearly as if it had been enforced by a .45.

Duff's next words came reluctantly. "It was whisky talk, Miss, but I reckon it sounded like I was a—a kinda bully and—a liar."

"Get out," Ducret ordered.

The big man shuffled across the sidewalk into the saloon.

"I don't know where you are going, Miss Hamilton," Ducret said. "But there are a lot of roughs out tonight. I'll walk with you."

"I'm sorry," Nora told him, as they moved down the sidewalk. "You've made an enemy of him."

The Texan dismissed Duff from consideration. "We won't worry about that."

"It was kind of you to help me. I'll always remember."

He waved her thanks aside. "Where I come from men aren't allowed to insult good women."

The adjective surprised her. She glanced quickly at him and decided to let her unhappiness break into words. "Are they going to—to kill him?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Looks like it. They wouldn't if the sheriff was worth the powder to blow him up."

"Won't somebody stop them?" She thought of how he had cowed Duff. "You could do it. I'm sure you could."

Hard-eyed, he looked at her. They had turned into the walk leading to the Cottrell house. "Why should I? He brought this on himself. And it's not the first time."

"But he is not guilty."

[*Turn page*]

AN EXCITING NEW EPIC OF THE FRONTIER

•

BUGLES BEFORE DAWN

A Novel of Navajos on the Warpath

by

GLADWELL RICHARDSON

•

COMING NEXT ISSUE—PLUS MANY OTHER STORIES!

"How do you know he isn't?"

She had no evidence to offer that he gave any weight. He told her bluntly that even if he thought the prisoners innocent he would not lift a hand for them. The Sloans were no friends of his.

He left her on the porch.

X

QUIET strains of music were sounding in the Cottrell home.

Julia was at the piano when Nora knocked. The music stopped and she came to the door. After a look at Nora's face she cried, "What's the matter?"

"They are going to kill Randy Sloan. They are getting ready to break into the jail."

Julia was startled. "I didn't know he was in jail. I came back from riding an hour ago. Are you sure?"

"I saw them bring him in. Everybody in town knows they are going to—to lynch him."

From Nora's stricken face Julia gathered fear, though she still protested that it could not be true. She led the way into her father's office. He was reading a newspaper but looked up from it to listen to his daughter's excited questions.

He said blandly, "I think Miss Hamilton is unduly disturbed." There were always hotheads, he explained, to start wild talk that came to nothing. Naturally the town was incensed at the wanton murder of the stage coach passenger, but the sheriff had the prisoners locked up and would permit no violence. In due time the law would punish the murderers.

Nora protested that the arrested men were not guilty but would be taken out and hanged before the night was over unless somebody stopped the crime.

"You could save them, Father," Julia said.

He laced his fingers and leaned back in the chair. "My dear, this is nonsense. These men are under the custody of our good sheriff. He will enforce law and order. There is not the least need for me to interfere." To Nora he spoke in gentle reproof. "I warned you to forget this young man. Knowing him as you did not, I begged you to have nothing to do with him. Again I urge you to put him out of your mind. He has gone bad. Remember the Scriptural injunction, 'He that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword.' I have seen many like him. They go from bad to worse—live violently and come to a sudden and terrible end."

Looking down at her father, Julia realized fully for the first time what manner of man he was. A scorn of him surged up in her. He was a quicksand of deceit. She felt sure he knew what was planned for tonight. He wanted Randy Sloan killed.

She said, a lash of contempt in her voice, "You will do nothing to save these men?"

"I will not make myself ridiculous by insulting Pete Walsh," he answered.

Julia said to the other girl, "Come," and walked out of the room.

"If we could get word to Sumner Sloan in time," Nora cried as soon as they were alone.

"We'll talk with Brad Webber," Julia decided. It was possible that Nora's fear was exaggerating the danger. The banker would know what was best to do.

They found him at home in his shirtsleeves and slippers reading "Kenilworth." When the bank closed he had come straight home and did not even know that the Sloan men had been arrested. Julia saw that Nora's news disturbed him greatly. He reached for his boots and put them on.

"What are you going to do?" his wife asked.

"I'm going to find out if there aren't enough men with sand in town to stop this outrage," he told her.

"I spoke to Father," Julia said. "He won't lift a hand. He says it is absurd that men will try to storm the jail."

WEBBER gave her a strange look. He wondered if Anse Cottrell was not at the bottom of the disturbance. If

so, the ruffians would stop at nothing. The banker knew it would not be easy to gather a group to fight actively against a lynching. The town was angry at the killing of the Kentuckian and felt that the two prisoners were guilty.

A knock sounded on the door. Mrs. Webber opened it, to let in the Methodist minister. He had just come from up town and was much alarmed. All the talk was of breaking into the jail. He had spoken to several of his congregation and they had refused to interfere.

"We ought to get word to Sumner Sloan," Nora urged.

"That might mean more bloodshed," the minister demurred.

Julia drew Webber aside and talked with him. He shook his head, listened, protested, and at last consented to her urgent argument.

"We're going to the ranch," Julia told Nora. "Mr. Webber is going to try to hold off the jail attack until the Sloans get here."

She led the way to the stable back of the Cottrell house. Julia's riding horse was kept at a livery stable but the one Anse used for his buggy stayed here. Without lighting a lantern Julia harnessed the animal and put it between the buggy shafts. Quietly as possible she drove out of the yard, taking a back street to get out of town unnoticed. They could hear the shouts of excited men on the main street a block away. Neither of them voiced their fear that even if they could get help it would be too late.

A man hailed them. "Hi, Jule, this is no time for you to be out on the street." He stepped into the road from the sidewalk.

Julia had stopped reluctantly. She did not want to arouse suspicion. "Why not?" she demanded.

"There's trouble afoot. Better go home."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Never mind. Do as I say."

"Why should I, Jim McHenry?"

Nora interrupted in a low voice. "He's one of the men who brought Randy to town."

"So you are one of Dan Duff's killer crew," Julia flung at him, her voice like a whip.

He denied it swiftly. He was against this lynching, but there was not a thing he could do about it. The town had gone crazy.

Julia told him what he could do—report to Brad Webber and help arouse good citizens. He explained that the trouble was nobody cared to make a fight to save a pair of bandits who had just shot down an innocent stranger.

"They did not rob the stage," Nora broke out. "They had nothing to do with it. Can't you see it's a plot of their enemies?"

McHenry looked at her, surprised at her vehemence. "You may be right," he replied.

"Then do something about it," Julia told him stormily. "Get your gun and go see Brad Webber."

She flicked the horse with the light lash and the animal started.

McHenry watched them go, wondering what Julia was up to.

Presently the lights of the town lay behind the girls. The horse was a stepper and Julia held him to a fast clip. The first miles were over a gun-barrel road that dipped and rose here and there but not enough to prevent rapid travel. When they reached the hill country later they would have to go more slowly.

Though both of them were sick with anxiety they drove long stretches in silence. Julia broke one of these to say, "They will probably wait long enough to get a lot of fools drunk before they attack."

At the summit of the first long climb Julia pulled up the horse. "Somebody is coming," she said. "Listen."

THEY could hear the clip-clop of horses' hoofs approaching at a trot. Out of the darkness came a dozen riders, most of them carrying rifles across the saddles in front of them. They stopped, gathering round the buggy. Julia recognized several of them—Sumner, his uncle Crawford Sloan, a little man

named Tubbs, and Jed Larson, married to the sister of the Sloan brothers.

Sumner said brusquely to Julia, "You're the Cottrell girl, aren't you?"

"Yes," Julia replied sharply. "Forget that. Your brother is in a bad jam. The town has gone crazy. They are going to storm the jail and hang him."

The shock of her words swept through the group.

"You sure?" Sumner demanded.

"Sure they are going to try. Brad Webber is trying to raise a group to delay them."

Tubbs cut in with a rasping incredulous laugh. "So Old Anse sends his daughter to warn us. That listens reasonable."

"It's true," Nora cried. "Mr. Cottrell didn't send Julia."

Crawford Sloan rebuked Tubbs. "No more of that, Joe. We are under great obligations to these young ladies." To Julia he spoke. "Any time for the jail attack set, Miss Cottrell?"

"I don't know when. There is a lot of drinking. Hurry—hurry!"

Sumner put his horse to a gallop and pounded down the slope. The others followed. The thud of the hoofs thinned to a murmur and died away. Julia turned the buggy and headed back for town.

XI

FROM the barred window of their prison Randolph Sloan looked down on a town seething with unrest. The lights had been on for hours and Jeff Davis Street was alive with shifting figures. Men poured in and out of the saloons constantly. From more than one small group had come the savage triumphant yell of man-hunters primed for the kill.

Morgan Vance joined him at the window. "Won't be long now," he said. "Get a guy drunk and he's filled with Dutch courage. With a hundred others beside him he ain't scared to kill a couple of unarmed men." He had once helped to hang two rustlers and the memory of it was not pleasant.

Randy did not answer immediately. He was watching a small group of men moving down the opposite side of the street. Brad Webber was one of them. The others were old Matt Chunn, Jim McHenry, the stage driver, Hank Main, his shotgun messenger Nate Cleland, and young Bob Watson.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" Morg exclaimed. "What's tying that bunch together?"

It did seem an incongruous group. Webber and Chunn were friends of the Sloans, McHenry and Watson had been two of the deputies arresting them, and the stage coach team had made it understood that they were neutrals in the feud. But a faint hope stirred in Randy. Brad and Matt would not be with the others if they were unfriendly to him. He wondered if they were armed. If they had come only to argue with Duff and his crowd it would do no good.

Presently the owner of the corral, Monty Norris, joined them.

Morgan damped his companion's hopes. "That puny bunch can't stand up to a mob hell-bent on stringing us up. They know that doggoned well and they won't try."

A shift in the group showed that Nate Cleland had a saddle gun with him. Webber crossed the road followed by the others and knocked on the door of the jail. A deputy sheriff answered from a window with a question. "What you want?"

Webber explained that they wanted to see the sheriff, to offer help in defending the jail if necessary. The deputy replied that Walsh had left town to arrest some horse thieves. He was in charge of the jail and did not need any help. The banker argued but could not change his stand.

Duff and LePage came down the street with two other men, all the worse for liquor. Webber said, "Dan, this is murder."

"Sure. They had no call to kill that poor feller on the stage."

"You know what I mean. Those men inside may not be guilty. Give them a chance to prove it."

"What kind of chance did they give the hill-billy? No, sir. They're going to

dance at the end of ropes." Duff waited for no answer but swaggered down the street.

Webber posted his men behind an adobe wall opposite the jail. "I don't think anything will start just yet," he said. "I'm going to see Anse Cottrell. If anybody can stop this, he is the man."

Cottrell did not want to talk with Webber but he greeted him with a pretence of heartiness, laying down the newspaper he had hurriedly picked up. "Well—well, Brad. Nice to see you. I just been reading that Hal Spence aims to run for county commissioner. He would make a good one."

"Anse, we've got to stop this murder Duff and his ruffians are getting ready to commit," Webber broke in. "It will disgrace this town forever."

"Is Dan up to some more deviltry?" Anse asked blandly.

Though Webber was aware that Cottrell knew the situation quite well he told him the circumstances. Anse replied suavely that Brad was taking the situation too seriously. Duff and LePage were blowhards making drunken talk and if they made any foolish attempt the good sheriff would frustrate it. In any case he was a private citizen and could do nothing about it.

They heard the trampling of feet on the porch. Four men broke into the room, all of them armed. Cottrell heaved his big body from the chair, his eyes hard and slitted. "What does this mean?" he demanded.

Crawford Sloan answered him bluntly, cold anger in his harsh voice. "It means that if your gunmen kill Randy tonight you die too."

Joe Tubbs had a rope in his hands. He flung the loop over Cottrell's head and tightened it. The eyes of Anse swept around to take in the other two men. He knew them both. One was Jed Larsen, a gaunt fellow with sunken cheeks and bitter eyes. Cottrell had brought about the death of his brother a few years earlier. The fourth man was Andy Putnam. Anse had once stood by and seen one of his cowboys flog the little fellow with a whip. Any one of these men would be willing to satisfy his hatred against the enemy who had injured them all.

"You in this too, Brad?" Cottrell asked.

CRAWFORD answered for him. "No, but since he is here he will have to stay. We will keep this a private party without interruption. I'll explain the situation. A dozen of us are in town, all well armed. There isn't going to be any lynching. We're taking Randy and Morg home with us. You're going down town, this rope around your throat, to tell your killers to lay off."

Anse looked him in the eye. "If I do what guarantee do I have that you won't kill me afterward?"

"No guarantee except my word," Crawford told him. "We're calling the turn, not you."

"You wouldn't dare hang me."

Tubbs laughed maliciously. "I'm yearning for the chance," he gibed. "Stick it out, you old wart, so I can show you." He added, on a savage impulse, "Let's do it now. We'll never find a better time."

"Don't push on the reins, Joe," Crawford said. "It may come to that, but not yet. We didn't come here to hang a man but to save our two boys from it. Make your mind up quick, Anse. There is a howling mob up town ready to barge into trouble. A half a dozen men may be dead inside of ten minutes if we don't hurry."

"Not Randy or Morg either, but a bunch of your plug-uglies who have needed killing for a hell of a long time," Putnam chipped in venemously.

"I'll go," Cottrell decided. "I'm a law-abiding citizen and if I can help prevent a riot it is my duty."

"Besides being a lot more comfortable than hanging from a tree limb and kicking your heels in the air," Tubbs jeered. "Don't feed us talk about your duty, you old hypocrite. We know you."

"Before I move a step I want this rope taken from my neck," Cottrell said firmly.

Crawford Sloan removed the rope.

It would be less provocative if their prisoner seemed to be urging peace with no pressure on him.

As they moved up the street toward the jail the howl of a hundred voices came to them. It was the wolf-cry of the mob eager for the kill. Crawford set the pace faster. There was not much time left.

Duff's raucous shout racketed down between the buildings. "Two bad men going to dance at a rope's end into kingdom come."

In the momentary silence that followed a thin high treble flung back a shrill defiance. "One of 'em is going to be Dan Duff," it announced.

Old Matt Chunn was standing in the gateway of the wagon yard, a .45 in his hand. Somebody back of the wall jumped out and dragged Matt back to safety. It was Nate Cleland. A bullet struck the iron hinge of the gate and glanced off in ricochet. While Duff's gun was still smoking a rifle cracked from the flat roof of a cobbler's shop. Duff's big body swayed and went down in a huddled mass on the dusty road.

Sumner Sloan came to the edge of the roof, his long gaunt figure throwing a distorted shadow in the moonlight. "You crazy fools, a dozen rifles are covering you. Keep coming, and you'll be slaughtered."

Anse Cottrell lumbered forward. "Put up your guns and go home," he ordered. "The law will take care of these killers. Do as I tell you, unless you want a lot of widows in this town before morning."

Brad Webber gave the old man credit for nerve. He stood out in the open with the weapons of his enemies trained on him, men filled with a bitter and passionate hatred of him, and poured out a tirade of abuse on them, knowing that a crook of the finger might send a slug crashing into his belly.

Sumner Sloan glared down at Anse, his long frame tight and rigid. A hot and savage anger burned in him. Old memories poured turbulently through his mind—of the ruin this man had brought on his family and his friends, of outrages without number culminating in the deaths of his father and uncle, in his own long imprisonment. There had been a time when he would not have hesitated an instant to pay that debt, but the years had brought him patience. There would come an hour of settlement but this was not it. Too many of his friends were involved tonight and would be put in the wrong.

He cut Anse short harshly. "Enough of that. Give orders to your jailer to turn Randy and Morg over to us."

The would-be-lynchers had given up any thought of storming the jail. Most of them had been dragged along half-heartedly and even the others realized that a change in the situation had put them at a helpless disadvantage. From behind walls, from the roofs of buildings, from the open street they could see the projecting barrels of the rifles. The bully who had led them lay groaning in the road. They were in a hurry to get away before a general engagement started. At first a few of those in the rear slipped into saloons and entry ways, but presently the pressure to escape caused almost a stampede.

SOURLY Cottrell looked up at the window from which the anxious face of the jailer looked down. "Malvern, you see how it is," he rasped. "These scoundrels will tear the jail down to get the murderers they want to release. I advise you to give up your prisoners. The sheriff will arrest them later."

A man walked out of a doorway and joined Cottrell. He moved lazily and gracefully as a cat, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. Though he did not say a word, all those watching him knew Ducret had served notice he was ready to go into action if Cottrell was attacked.

"The trouble is over for tonight, Cully," Anse said hurriedly. He did not want his enemies to interpret Ducret's appearance as a challenge. If guns began to smoke both of them would be riddled with bullets.

The door of the jail opened and out of it came Randy Sloan and Morg Vance.

In spite of his limp the old cowpuncher moved jauntily, his hat tiptilted at a rakish angle as usual.

"Never was so glad in my life to get out of a calaboose," he said. His glance picked up Duff lying in the dust whimpering. "Too bad the boys spoiled your nice picnic, Dan. You don't have any luck, do you?"

Brad Webber stepped forward "Somebody had better get Doctor Jones. It would be a good idea for the rest of us to go home. We ought to be grateful for one thing. This town has just missed having the most tragic night in its history. It ought to be a lesson to all of us."

"We'll rock along, boys," Sumner said. "Show's over. These windjammers of Cottrell are gun-shy when there is a showdown."

The Sloan group moved in a compact body to their mounts. They could be heard laughing and talking jubilantly. Presently the beat of their horses' feet sounded as they cantered out of town.

Even the wiser ones among them shared the gladness. They had rescued their friends without a costly battle. If Duff was mortally wounded, he had only himself to blame. It lifted the spirits of all of them to feel that the Sloan faction was again a power in the district. Yet the leaders realized that the battle lines were drawn and grim war lay ahead of them.

XII

ENEMIES acted swiftly and the Sloans did not have to wait long to find out when and how the Cottrells would move against them. Crawford's barn was burned one night. Two days later four of Pitkin's cattle were found dead in an arroyo with bullet holes in their heads. Within twenty-four hours after this somebody in the brush took a long shot at Sumner and missed. The bullet tore away part of the saddle horn.

Early in the following week Hugh Pressman rode in to the Sloan ranch at a gallop. He flung himself from the horse and took the porch steps three at a time. The men were eating supper. When they looked at the boy's face they knew he had brought bad news.

"Joe Tubbs has been killed," he cried.

The horse of Tubbs had come home without him, a stain of blood on the saddle. A search party had found his body lying on the road three miles from his ranch. He was still clutching a Winchester he had evidently fired twice. The killer had secreted himself back of a mesquite near the road. Four cigarette butts were found there where he had been waiting.

"Better for Joe if he had pulled the rope tight and strangled Old Anse when he had the chance," Vance said bitterly. "Might have known the vindictive old devil would get him."

In guessing who had pulled the trigger from back of the mesquite the name of Dan Duff had to be omitted. He was lying at the home of the widow Jelks still a very sick man. There was no hospital in the town and she was considered an excellent nurse. Reluctantly Anse Cottrell had agreed to guarantee payment in the event that the wounded man died or defaulted. He had a mortgage on her home and she could deduct the price from the interest.

To Anse Mrs. Jelks came with a story very disturbing to him. In Duff's delirious hours he had talked a lot. Much of what he said was disconnected snatches out of his past. Two or three times he had referred to the stage holdup as if he had a part in it. Once he had cried out, "I didn't mean to kill him."

"Did he name anybody else?" Cottrell asked.

When she told him that Duff had not, Anse advised her to say nothing of this. The talk of delirious men really meant nothing.

"Dan is afraid he is going to die," the widow said. "Twice he has asked me to get the preacher. Seems like he's got something to confess. Then when he feels a little better he tells me to wait a while. Maybe his mind would be more at rest if I brought the preacher anyhow."

Cottrell advised her strongly not to

do so. It would frighten Dan, making him feel that she was expecting him to die. The best thing to do was to keep him cheerful.

When she had gone he paced the office floor anxiously. In his present condition Duff was an imminent danger to him. Whom could he use to do the job? LePage had taken care of Joe Tubbs, but he was not to be trusted for this. He was too thick with Dan. Ducret came to mind, but the Texan had queer kinks in his make-up, a kind of twisted loyalty. He would not kill except in a quarrel a man on the same side as himself, and in any case he probably would not shoot anybody from ambush. Other names drifted through his mind, only to be rejected.

He must do it himself. This decision he reached with a wry resentment. He hated to become involved personally in killings, but this time he could not stand back and let someone else take what risk there was. It seemed safe enough if he was careful. The widow's house was set apart from others in a dark part of town. There ought to be no danger of discovery, but there was always an off chance of being seen in the vicinity. It had to be done. Of late things had been breaking badly for him. If Duff weakened and confessed it would ruin him. He had no compunctions. Dan was living on borrowed time anyhow. He was a danger to others as well as to Anse.

It was sheer bad luck that Sumner Sloan's shot had not killed the man instead of leaving him a menace that for the moment deflected Anse from his prime intent of destroying the foes he so bitterly hated. The chemistry of an animosity that never ceased to smolder rode his mind to the exclusion of all pleasure. He had to ruin utterly the strong stiff men who had come back from defeat to face him with scornful contempt. Now he had to waste energy to get rid of the blundering fool who had turned soft. He decided to pay Duff a visit.

It would look well for him to go and cheer up the fellow.

WHEN he stepped into Duff's bedroom he found there another visitor, Homer Bascom, whom Cottrell regarded as of no more importance than a lost mongrel. The nester rose to go. Anse treated him civilly, since he was a friend of LePage.

Like many big hearty men who have never been ill Duff was frightened. The fear that he was going to die obsessed him. He blamed Cottrell for getting him into the attempted lynching.

Anse laughed at his fears. Only a few hours ago, he said, Doctor Jones had told him Dan was doing fine. He would be up and about in a week or so. The old man confided to Duff that he had great plans for him. The Tubbs ranch was a well-watered spread but heavily mortgaged. Anse intended to foreclose on it and turn the property over to Dan, making the payments so easy that he would hardly feel them. His motive, the schemer admitted to allay suspicion, was entirely selfish. He wanted to surround his place with friendly neighbors who would be co-operative.

The doctor had cut his patient off from liquor, but Anse had brought with him a stiff jolt that put Dan in a more optimistic mood. He began to brag and bluster. He would show Sum Sloan where he got off. That whisky hit the right spot, no matter what Doc Jones said. But why bring him only one drink? If he had a bottle he could keep it hidden in the bed.

Cottrell looked doubtful, but under persuasion promised to bring him a pint after darkness had fallen. It would not do for him to disregard openly the orders of the doctor.

Mrs. Jelks was pleased to find the sick man brighter and in a better humor. Cottrell complimented her on her nursing and slipped her a five-dollar bill to buy any little luxury Dan might desire.

The visit had done Anse as much good as it had Duff. He could see there was now no danger of an immediate confession. Also, he felt a strange satisfaction at having comforted the man and made his last hours happier. He rationalized that Duff would be better

dead. The fellow would have fewer sins to account for in the next world if he died now.

Darkness was falling over the town as Cottrell walked home. The time of action was important. It had better be after Mrs. Jelks had given her patient supper and fixed him up for the night and before he had fallen asleep. The colored woman who did the Cottrell cooking would have finished the supper dishes and gone home and Julia was to attend a church social. There would be nobody in the house to miss him. After he had done what must be done he would appear at the church and take a pleasant interest in the proceedings.

He wore a dark broadcloth suit, the one he kept for Sunday best, and under the long Prince Albert coat he secreted a sawed-off gun loaded with buckshot. Though the road was on the outskirts of town and not much frequented at night, he did not take it but crossed a deserted yard strewn with dog kennels and a few jonquils that still persisted in blooming. By way of her cow pasture he came to Mrs. Jelks' back yard. There was a light in her end of the house but none in the room occupied by Duff.

Noiselessly he circled the building and came to an open window. He waited to listen for any sound either outside or in the house. Somewhere in the distance a dog howled. Frogs croaked in a pond not far away. A shot racketed down Texas street, probably fired by a cowboy on a bender. From the room of the wounded man no stir came. He had been bedded down for the night. Whether he was or was not asleep yet Cottrell could not tell. His eyes searched the darkness to make sure nobody was moving up or down the road.

His first try at getting the attention of Duff was a whispered croak that did not reach across the room. He swallowed, to clear his dry throat. His voice must not be loud enough for Mrs. Jelks to hear it.

"Dan, are you awake?" he quavered.

"Who is it? What you want?" Duff asked.

"It's Anse. Keep your voice low. I got a bottle here for you, but Mrs. Jelks mustn't know. Can you light the lamp?"

"Sure, but you don't need a light to come in the window."

"I don't want to knock anything over. We'll blow it out soon as I've got the whisky to you."

Duff fumbled for the matches, found them, struck a light, and put it to the wick. The lopsided flame guttered up. Before he had replaced the lamp chimney the crash of the gun sounded. His body fell forward, life stricken out of it by a dozen buckshot.

ANSE scuttled away, again hiding the weapon beneath the long coat. His glance swept up and down the road before he crossed it. He did not look back or he would have seen a woman standing at the corner of the house, so petrified by fear that she could neither move nor cry out. She was returning from the house of a neighbor where she had been to borrow four eggs for breakfast next morning, three of them for Duff.

Anse reached home safely and cleaned the gun in the dark. After washing his hands he slipped out of the house and started for the church. On the way he dropped the empty shell in an irrigating ditch. At the social he was a model of elderly amiability, to the surprise of the young people joining in a game of Skip-to-my-Lou. His good spirits were not wholly assumed. He had escaped a pressing danger and could now give his entire attention to the Sloans.

The crash of the gun, not a dozen yards from her, had brought Anita Jelks to a standstill back of the rose bushes. Fear choking her throat, she saw Anse Cottrell come around the corner of the house. He was slipping a sawed-off shotgun under his long coat. His hurried glance stabbed in her direction and the inhuman wolfishness stamped on his face filled her with terror. She thought he must see her, but the dense foliage protected her and he shuffled away fast, his heavy graceless figure merging into the darkness.

In the house Mrs. Jelks found Duff's lifeless body sprawled half on the bed, the head and arms resting on the floor. She dropped the eggs and ran screaming to the nearest neighbor.

Brad Webber was one of the first to arrive. He and his wife had been on the way to the church social. What he saw disturbed him greatly, for he feared some one of the Sloan faction had done this in reprisal for the murder of Tubbs. Later he revised his opinion without entirely reversing it. One bit of evidence pointed in another direction. Mrs. Jelks had put out the light and left for the night. It was evident that Duff himself had relighted the lamp since the burnt match was still in one hand and broken bits of the glass chimney crushed in the other fist. There were no powder burns and the buckshot that had torn into the wall plaster indicated that the gun had been fired from the window. Duff must have lighted the lamp after somebody had called to him. He would not have done so unless the voice had been that of somebody he did not fear.

Mrs. Jelks was still almost hysterical with shock. In imagination she saw again that dreadful feral face of the murderer. If he learned that she had seen him he would kill her too. For years she had heard the stories of his evil deeds, not quite believing them. But she knew now that some of them were true. He was too powerful for her to accuse. The story she told in broken sentences left him out entirely.

Sheriff Walsh brushed aside the banker's deduction. The Sloans had always been bitter enemies of Duff. Why go around Robin Hood's barn to guess that some friend had done it? Of course he had no proof, he mentioned, and so could not arrest them. Of which he was privately very glad. He did not want to have to cope with a battle on the square between the two factions.

XIII

HUNTING for unbranded cows, Randy Sloan and Tim Jolly were riding a ridge above a small park where larkspur grew. This was beyond the range where Sloan cattle usually fed, but occasionally strays wandered this far and ate the lovely blue and purple blossoms that were to them a deadly poison. During the flowering season riders patrolled the district to push stock away from the vicinity.

"Looks like cows would know enough to leave larkspur alone," Tim commented.

Sloan grinned across at the cowboy who was still a little bleary-eyed from a week-end spree. "Looks like humans would know enough to leave rotgut alone when they know it poisons them," he replied.

"Sure enough," Tim agreed. "Me, I'm off of liquor for quite some time."

A shot sounded from back of a bend in front of them. A few seconds later came another, no louder but nearer.

"A rifle and a six-gun," Randy said. "I reckon we better investigate."

They rode forward to a clump of stunted pines on the edge of the prong. Here they dismounted and moved cautiously on foot to see what was taking place in the land pocket below. It was an offset from the rolling country above the plain, shaped like a horseshoe, the inner part strewn with large boulders. Back of a flat-surfaced rock a man was crouched, revolver in hand. It was clear that the weapon was not going to help him much since another man with a Winchester rifle was standing in the gateway of the pocket a hundred yards distant pumping lead at him. The one back of the boulder was outraged. Presently his foe would circle along the foot of the ridge and drive him from his cover.

"The guy nearest us is Homer Bascom," Tim said. "And the other is Clint LePage. Looks like we ain't in this scrap."

"We'll take a hand," Randy decided. "Enough to stop it. Keep out of sight in the brush and I'll slip over to the clump of pines on the point. Give me two-three minutes to get there. Don't shoot to hit. When LePage finds out

Bascom has help he'll light out quick."

"Maybe we better settle the sidewinder's hash right now. He's a bad *hombre*."

"No," Randy ordered sharply. "We'll handle this my way."

"You're the doctor. Get going."

Presently Randy's rifle boomed out from the pines. Almost before the sound of it died Tim Jolly's gun spoke. Spurts of dust rose a few feet from LePage. The man's glance swept along the ridge to the two points from which puffs of smoke were rising. He fired once toward the pines, then raced for the horse grazing near him. Swinging into the saddle, he turned his mount and kicked it to a gallop. The guns from the ridge roared again as he dashed through the gap and disappeared into a land fold outside.

"Drop that gun, Homer," Randy shouted. "We're not going to hurt you."

Bascom dropped the weapon. Randy slithered down a steep slope from the bluff while Tim went to get the horses.

The trembling hands of Bascom were in the air. He was still a thoroughly frightened man. "Don't shoot me, Randy," he begged.

"I thought you and LePage claimed to be friends."

"He would have killed me if you hadn't come along."

It came to Sloan that this rabbit-hearted little man with the worried lost dog look on his face might be of help as a witness since he had evidently broken with Cottrell's killers.

"Drop your arms and quit shivering," he said. "We're not murderers. What is the trouble between you and LePage?"

"He got sore at me. Fact is, I got off on the wrong foot, you might say."

"You mean running with LePage and his crowd?"

"That's right. I didn't figure things would go the way they have. I'm no killer. I ain't ever shot at a man till right now. It got so I couldn't go along with Clint. This morning I told him so."

"Because he killed Joe Tubbs, you mean?"

Bascom took alarm. It was not safe to talk too much. "If he did, I'm not saying so."

"He was afraid you were going to tell what you knew and decided he had better rub you out."

"I don't know why he got mad," Bascom said doggedly. "After I left his place he got his rifle and followed me. When I saw him coming I got scared. He ran me into these rocks. I dassn't go back to my cabin. He'll lay for me if I do."

Don't crowd him, Randy told himself. He is afraid to rat on his gang. Let him figure it out that it is the best way out of the jam he is in. Go easy on him.

"You don't have to go back to your ranch," Randy said. "You can stay at our place for a while and see how this works out."

THE homesteader stared at him, eyebrows lifted in the perpetual bewilderment they seemed to express. He was both surprised and suspicious. Yet if he dared accept it, the Sloan ranch would be the surest place of refuge for the present. His first impulse was to justify himself.

"I hadn't a thing to do with the shooting at Sumner or the killing of Tubbs. I never did have a hate against you Sloans."

"If I thought you had I wouldn't be asking you to the ranch," Randy answered. "You just got into bad company for a while."

Tim brought the horses up and Bascom went to reclaim his mount from the rocks among which it was grazing. While he was away Randy explained to the range rider that Bascom would go back with them to the ranch and was to be treated as a guest. He was to be made to feel he would be protected if he trusted them.

Bascom helped with the work around the ranch. The Sloans explained to him that he could leave any time he wished. All he need do was saddle and say "*adios*" if he did not like their company. He could go home and patch up a peace

with LePage if that was what he wanted. The mere suggestion alarmed their guest. If he did that it would be the same as committing suicide, he said. He was easier in mind than he had been in a long time. If they would let him stay he would be grateful.

Within twenty-four hours he came to Randy and volunteered to tell all he knew. Sumner joined them and the three walked out to the corral where they could talk and not be heard. It was hard for Bascom to get started but when he did, the homesteader found it a relief to pour out the story.

He had never been wholly a member of the gang but after becoming intimate with LePage he had gradually been dragged in deeper. From talk he had heard it was Duff who had killed Watt Saulsbury the shotgun messenger at the first Blue Creek stage robbery. His confederates had been Shonsey and LePage. When the second holdup was under discussion Bascom was to have been one of the road agents but he had lost his nerve and pretended to be sick before the actual stick-up. Duff had shot the Kentucky hill-billy after the man had made a slight resistance. Cottrell had been back of the second robbery, though he had not shared in the stolen gold. Bascom had been given a hundred dollars as his quota.

For shooting Joe Tubbs the price paid LePage by Cottrell was three hundred dollars. He had been offered six hundred to get either Sumner or Randy Sloan. By this time Bascom was a man living in terror. He could not help showing this, and he realized the killers were watching him suspiciously. To allay their doubts he had called on Dan Duff the afternoon of the gunman's last day. He had found Duff in deep dejection, filled with the fear he was going to die of his wound. He wanted to see a preacher to confess his sins.

While he was still talking about this Anse Cottrell had dropped in to visit the wounded man. Within three hours of that time Duff had been shot. Bascom was convinced the man had talked too much and that Cottrell, to prevent a confession, had arranged his death.

"LePage?" asked Sumner.

"Couldn't have been LePage. He was at his ranch when it was done."

"You have no guess who?"

"No."

"Might have been Ducret," Sumner said.

Bascom shook his head. "Don't think so. The talk in the gang is that Ducret won't do that kind of killing."

"We'll never know who pulled the trigger," Randy was of opinion. "But we can feel sure who ordered it done."

"I didn't suppose I would ever live to see the day when I would be sorry Dan Duff was dead," Sumner remarked. "But if I had known it was in his mind to confess, I would have sat outside his window and guarded him."

THE brothers impressed on Bascom the need of constant vigilance. He was a key witness of great importance and Cottrell's outfit would do their best to get rid of him. Unless he was with at least two of the Bigg's Bend men he must never leave the ranch headquarters, and even in and around the house he had better always keep a gun handy.

"I'm no kind of a gunslinger," Bascom lamented. "Against LePage or Ducret I wouldn't last longer than a snowflake in Yuma."

Randy grinned cheerfully. "We aim to keep you alive. You ought to be safe here if you don't get careless—safer than either Sum or I anyhow. Keep whistling and you'll find you get a kick out of it."

Bascom wished he were like the Sloans, but he did not think that any amount of whistling would give him any pleasure in being made a target.

That evening he rode into town with the Sloans over the hills to the house of Judge Simmons and put his story in the form of a signed confession.

When Sheriff Walsh two days after the murder, questioned Anita Jelks about the killing of Dan Duff to find out whether she had seen anybody hanging around prior to the murder,

Anse Cottrell took care to be present. Though he had no reason to think she could give any evidence incriminating him, it was better to be sure.

Mrs. Jelks was a middle-aged woman, lean, wiry, and flat chested. She sat on the edge of the chair, plainly ill at ease. No, she had not noticed anybody watching the house either during the day or early evening. A few hours before the shooting two visitors had called on Duff, the nester, Homer Bascom, and Mr. Cottrell. The wounded man was in better spirits after they had gone.

Anse explained that he had cheered Duff up, assuring him that the doctor had said he was much improved. The sick man had expressed fears that the Sloans would sneak into town and get him.

"Sure you didn't see any of the Sloan crowd around?" the sheriff asked Mrs. Jelks.

Yes, she was sure.

"Lucky for you that you didn't, Anita," Anse said. "They are a bad lot and wouldn't think twice of killing you if they thought you knew anything. But you must not worry. We will protect you."

Her reluctant gaze was drawn to him. His thick gross body was hunkered low in the chair and his beady eyes were fastened on her. She shuddered, the fear heavy in her that he might have seen her as he was leaving on that dreadful night. Perhaps he was warning her not to talk. She could not be sure.

Walsh said, as he and Cottrell walked down the road, "She knows something she isn't telling and she's scared to death."

Anse ridiculed the idea. If she knew anything more about the crime there was no reason why she should not tell it. Yet the fear worried him that she had seen him. While Walsh quizzed her she had seemed on the verge of a breakdown. It was of Anse she was afraid. He could read it in her eyes.

Cottrell was right. As soon as the men had gone Anita Jelks began to tremble, terror pressing in on her. About this man was something dreadful. He would destroy her as he had Duff. What could she do? To whom could she go for help?

The Webbers had always been friendly. Thirty years earlier she had gone to school with Jennie. After dark she slipped from her house, crossed a cow pasture, and came to the back door of the banker's home. When it was closed behind her she broke into a wail. "I'm going to be killed."

Jennie Webber at first could not believe her story. She had never trusted or liked Anse Cottrell but this was terribly shocking. Brad knew that what Mrs. Jelks told them was true. He saw clearly in what a dilemma Cottrell had been placed. Duff was weakening and he had to be stopped before he made a confession. The deduction he had offered to the sheriff was correct. Dan had lighted the lamp because he thought he had nothing to fear from Cottrell.

THE banker comforted the frightened woman. Nobody knew she was here. They would keep her under cover until the danger was past. The first thing to do was to get her statement down on paper. Webber stepped across the road to the house of Judge Simmons and brought him back with him. The judge wrote out Anita's account of what she had seen and she signed the paper, the Webbers witnessing it.

Simmons had always felt that Anse Cottrell was sly, murderous, and treacherous. Within the hour he had been given further evidence of this by the testimony of Bascom, a confession which implicated Anse in two stage robberies, the murder of Tubbs, and various other crimes. After the women had left the room, he shared with Webber the knowledge of what he had just heard. It had seemed to him and to the Sloan brothers that if LePage was arrested and pressure put on him he would squeal in the hope of saving his own neck. When Cottrell's followers found out their chief was trapped they would probably desert him at once.

"All but Cully Ducret," Webber excepted. "I don't think he will. He is

very loyal to Anse. You saw how he walked out to join the old man when half a dozen Sloan guns were pointed at him."

"Ducret is a strange character," the judge replied. "Earlier that night he faced Duff down and made him apologize to Miss Hamilton for having insulted her. They say he never shot a man except in fair fight. Bascom says he stays clear of Cottrell's schemes and all his underhanded plotting. Though a professional gambler, he has the reputation of being straight. He lives up to his own queer code. I believe that if we showed him this evidence about Anse he would break away from him."

"If he could see it that way, lives might be saved," the banker said. "But whatever else you tell him don't let him know Anita Jelks is here."

The judge promised to be very careful how he handled the situation.

XIV

UPON leaving Judge Simmons' house the Sloans had made up their minds LePage must be arrested that night if possible. Part of the time he stayed in town and part at a cabin in the hills. Since they did not want word to reach him that he was in danger they had to be wary in seeking information. Randy suggested that Nora Hamilton might know if he was in Round Top as her store was within forty yards of the Empire saloon where the outlaws usually could be found. Sumner waited in the darkness behind her place while the younger brother went in to ask her if she had seen LePage.

Nora had been crying but at sight of him her swollen eyes brightened. She loved the careless ease of this slender brown man on whom the brand of the outdoors West was stamped so indelibly, the more because she knew that beneath his debonair youth there was a sun-and-wind-bitten maturity dependable as steel.

"More trouble?" he asked her gently.

She had just had a letter from the warden of the penitentiary where her brother was imprisoned telling her that her brother had just died leaving a confession that cleared her of the stigma resting upon her. She told her story to Randolph. Her brother Robert had always been wild, hanging around race tracks and pool rooms while she worked as a waitress at a Harvey House. He had got in with an older man, a criminal named Cash Fentry. Together they had held up and robbed a pay clerk on his way from the bank. Some hours after the robbery Fentry had come to the house and her brother had told her to go to bed as they had business to discuss. Though she suspected something wrong, she did not connect them with the holdup.

She fell asleep and an hour later was awakened by the sound of a shot. She ran downstairs in her nightgown and found Robert standing over the body with a smoking revolver in his hand. They had quarrelled over the division of the spoils. The police arrived while Nora was still in her nightgown. To save her brother's life she had admitted on the witness stand that Robert had just reached the house and found her and Fentry in a compromising position. The truth was that she had disliked the man extremely, but her false testimony had saved her brother from the hangman.

Randy comforted her. When the shock of her brother's death was past she would realize that this was the best way out for both him and her.

He asked her if she knew whether LePage was in town. She had seen him, she said, going into the Empire just before dark. He apologized for leaving in a hurry by explaining that Sumner was outside waiting for him.

The brothers walked into the Empire by way of the back door. In the saloon were a dozen men. Five of them were playing stud. The dealer glanced up casually, saw them, and murmured out of the corner of his mouth, "Look who's here, Clint." He was Hod Crane.

The players and the men at the bar watched the Sloans as they moved closer to the card table. They were a hard

tightmouthed lot and they wondered what the Bigg's Bend men were doing here in the habitat of their enemies. Neither of the Sloans had drawn their weapons.

Crane demanded in a surly voice, "What you want?"

"Nothing from you just now, Hod," Sumner answered. "Maybe your turn will come later. We want Clint to take a little walk with us."

LePage started to rise, alarm and anger in his eyes.

"No hurry," Randolph told him. "Play the hand out."

"I ain't taking any walk with you," LePage said.

"Just a short one, as far as the jail," Randolph corrected. His voice was quiet and even, but the gray-blue eyes, level and direct, were implacably hard.

"Got a warrant for him?" Crane demanded.

Sumner showed the paper given him by the judge.

Crane laughed sourly. "My advice is to stay where you're at, Clint."

"Are you declaring yourself in, Hod?" Sumner asked.

His gaze fastened on Crane, who glared back at him for a few long seconds before he gave way unable to face the stark resolution in the strong bony face.

"I don't know as I am," he mumbled. "It's up to Clint."

"Correct," Randolph agreed. "On your feet, LePage."

Fear climbed up the spine of LePage. He had to make a choice. His hand was within six inches of the .45 resting on his hip.

But he could not flog his fainting will to make the draw.

"I'm not guilty, boys," he pleaded hoarsely. "I didn't kill Joe. He was a neighbor of mine. Why would I do it?"

"For three hundred dollars paid by Anse Cottrell," Randolph retorted. "Start moving."

LePage rose. The Sloans moved forward and flanked him.

"No objections?" Sumner inquired grimly, his glance sweeping the room.

NOBODY raised any. If LePage did not have the sand to stand up to these men the others present were not going to call for a showdown that meant flaming guns.

Sheriff Walsh had gone home for the night but his deputy Malvern admitted them into the prison. Sumner stayed with LePage and the jailer while Randolph brought Judge Simmons and the county attorney Richard Powell, a young lawyer who had held aloof from both factions in the feud. For hours they harried LePage with questions. Just before daybreak he broke down and told what he knew.

To Anse Cottrell the arrest of his gunman was an appalling bit of bad luck. He knew LePage inside out. The fellow was chicken-hearted and would rat, hoping to save himself. More than once Anse had been in doubt about trusting the man. But that was water under the bridge. He had to find a way out of this horrible dilemma and move fast.

First, LePage must be got out of jail. After that he could take steps to get rid of the man. No use going to Powell about it. The Sloans had evidently already got at him. He must make use of Walsh, though he knew the sheriff would be reluctant to help him. Fortunately he had that crooked court house deal to hang over his head.

So far as he could see there was only one way to pull this off and LePage was such a blunderer he might boggle that. He took down the revolver hanging on the wall and loaded it. This he hung from a scabbard fastened under his arm. It was quite possible that one of the bullets in the chamber would kill an innocent man before night but he could not afford to worry about that.

He walked to the courthouse and into the office of the sheriff, closing the door behind him. Walsh was in no complacent humor. Rumors were flying around that Cottrell might soon be involved in serious trouble and if so it would not do a man any good to be a partisan of his.

"This spite arrest of Clint is an out-

rageous move of the Sloans," Anse said by way of an opening. "I'm surprised Powell would lend himself to it."

"He thinks he has got the goods on LePage," the sheriff said morosely. "It wouldn't surprise me."

"I hope Clint did not do such an evil thing as to kill Tubbs." Anse shook his head in virtuous sorrow. "If he did I can't stand back of him. But I must be sure. I want to talk with him. Write a line to Malvern, Pete, telling him to let me in for a talk with Clint."

"Powell told me not to let anybody see him," Walsh explained. "Sorry, Anse,"

"You are the sheriff, Pete. Powell can't give orders to you about your prisoners. Why shouldn't I talk with Clint? What harm can it do?"

"Don't know as it can do any harm, but—"

Anse interrupted him sharply. "You are under no obligations to Powell but you certainly are to me. I put you on the ticket and I covered up for you on that courthouse deal. This is a little thing I am asking, Pete."

WALSH could have told him that he had asked a good many favors not so little, but in this matter it did not seem worth while. He pulled a pad of paper to him and wrote a permit to visit LePage.

On his way to the jail Anse saw Judge Simmons walk into the Texas House. Since the judge was a church member and opposed to an open town this surprised him, though Cottrell did not give it much thought. Probably there was somebody there he wanted to see.

The prisoner was lying on a cot when his visitor was shown into the cell. Anse said cheerfully, "Sorry you are in this little jam, Clint, but I reckon I can get you out of it all right."

"About time you got here," LePage growled.

"I was out of town last night and didn't hear about your trouble until an hour ago. I came soon as I could get a pass from Pete."

"Did he give you a pass to let me out?" LePage asked with sullen bitterness.

Malvern had departed, telling them they had ten minutes.

"No, but I've brought the pass with me." Cottrell looked around to make sure the jailor was not in sight. He hurriedly passed the revolver to LePage.

"Loaded?"

Anse nodded. "Don't use it unless you are forced to. Bluff your way out if you can. When he brings you supper, say."

"Yeah, that would be the best time. How about a horse?"

"I'll have one waiting for you in the live oak grove. You'll need money. I'll be there with three hundred dollars."

"Better give it to me now."

"I haven't it with me, but I won't fail you."

"I feel sure you won't," LePage jeered. "You wouldn't like to hang any more than I would."

"You have not told Powell anything —done any talking that would get us in trouble?"

LePage looked him in the face and lied. "Not a word. Do you reckon I would throw down a good pal?"

"I'm sure you wouldn't. One of these days we'll meet and have a good laugh at the way we fooled Powell and his friends the Sloans."

"Y'betcha. I'll head for the line. Wish I could get a crack at that Randy Sloan before I go."

"You've had bad luck with him. If you had another chance, you would get him."

They smiled in pretended good-fellowship, each in his heart exulting in his betrayal of the other, a man he was sending to his death. Crime had tied them together in a bond both hated. Now they were paying mercilessly the grudge long cherished.

The sound of Malvern coming along the passage reached them. Cottrell put a comforting hand on the prisoner's shoulder.

"Be bold and tonight you'll sleep in peace, Clint," he said.

LePage missed the hidden irony of the promise.

XV

JUDGE Jefferson Simmons never patronized gambling houses or saloons for pleasure, but being a Westerner, he nevertheless understood that these establishments were the clubs of the frontier. Men met in them both for social and business purposes. So when he walked that day about noon into The Texas House neither the bartender nor the proprietor was much surprised. The judge nodded to them and strolled across the floor to the faro table.

Ducret was leaning back in the lookout's chair smoking a cigar. He was the dealer, but because he liked to relax occasionally he had changed places for the present with his helper. Since the day was still too young for the gamblers, the game had not yet started.

Through a thin spiral of rising smoke the Texan's narrowed eyes watched the approach of the judge. His catlike stillness suggested an indolence that was deceptive. He could move with incredible swiftness when the call came.

After a stiff "Good morning, Mr. Ducret," the judge came at once to his reason for being there.

"There is a very important matter I would like to talk over with you, sir," he said in a low voice.

Ducret took the cigar from his mouth, held it poised, and looked directly at the judge Their contacts had been limited to formal greetings as they passed on the street. The faro dealer could not guess what interest they had in common, but Jefferson Simmons was a dignified citizen, reserved in manner, not one likely to push himself into the affairs of another.

"I am listening," Ducret said.

"Not here," the judge told him. "This is a secret and dangerous matter."

The Texan made a suggestion after consideration. "Any place you say, Judge. I can drop around to your house when my shift is over, if that is convenient for you."

"That will do very well." Simmons hesitated before giving a word of caution. "Please consider this confidential."

He bowed and left. Ducret's eyes followed him to the door. He wondered what was back of this. It was not a trap, he felt sure. Judge Simmons was a Southern gentleman, entirely honorable. Nor was he a fool. He was too much a man of the world to arrange a meeting for the purpose of lecturing him on his evil ways.

In the long summer evenings darkness fell late. Children were still playing one old cat when Ducret sauntered down the street to the house of the judge. Their voices came sharp and clear from the vacant lot they used. The heat of the day had not yet lifted, though a breeze from the hills was beginning to stir.

An old Negro with only a fringe of white hair opened the door for Ducret and led him into a room walled with book shelves.

"The judge will be here shortly, sah," he told the visitor with the courtesy typical of so many of his race.

The Texan picked up a book from the table beside which he sat. It was a copy of *Kenilworth*. He opened the novel at random and was reading when the judge entered.

"You are an admirer of Scott perhaps," Simmons suggested after a word of greeting.

"When I was a boy I devoured all his novels and his long poems too," Ducret answered.

"In my opinion he is the greatest of them all," the judge said.

They discussed his work for a few minutes, the realization in the minds of both that whatever came later it was a passing pleasure to have found a common enthusiasm.

The judge broke the ice. "I am not sure that I am doing right in approaching you on this matter, Mr. Ducret. If I have misread your character it may be a great mistake. I want to put some facts before you of which

you are perhaps not aware. My reason is that a crisis is at hand and I do not want you to take a position without being fully informed."

"That is very good of you," Ducret told him ironically.

"You may feel this presumptuous. In the past you have been committed to the cause of Anse Cottrell, I understand."

"Consider me still so committed, sir," the Texan said coldly.

"Perhaps I had better get to the evidence I have to show you."

"As you wish." Ducret sat erect, stiffly resentful. Of late his doubts about Old Anse had been disturbing him but he did not care to hear any arguments from others on the subject.

THE judge did not argue. He showed the Texan copies of the statements made by Homer Bascom and Anita Jelks, and after he had read these the confession of LePage.

If true the three papers showed damning evidence against Anse. Ducret had known Cottrell was violent and revengeful, but he was not prepared for the long catalogue of crimes set down in the confession of Clint LePage. Yet to the gambler the most unforgivable offense was the murder of Dan Duff. The man had been Cottrell's partner in evil, had fought on the same side with him throughout the feud, and to save himself had been destroyed by him. It seemed to Ducret a callous betrayal of all decency.

"May I talk with Mrs. Jelks?" he asked.

Simmons could not promise that. "We are of opinion that if Cottrell knew where she is, he would try to murder her. That we must prevent. I suppose your point is that you want to hear this story from her own lips."

"That is right. I want to be sure."

"I'll see if it can be arranged."

The judge talked with Brad Webber and Mrs. Jelks. The woman said that she would trust Ducret. He had once done her a kindness. She was sure he would stand by his word.

An hour later he was listening to her story.

Though she now had powerful friends lined up to protect her, Anita Jelks was still very much afraid. Anse Cottrell loomed in her mind as a villian strong and ruthless. If word came to him that she was a danger to him he would destroy her. This fear ran through her whole story.

Ducret said, with an icy gentleness, "Don't be frightened, Mrs. Jelks. You'll never see him again alive."

He was a man with a bad record but one not wholly sold to evil. The revelation of Cottrell's treachery shocked him. He had been loyal to the man, excusing him because he knew that in blood feuds there was a pressure on a leader forcing him to be hard. It hurt his pride that he had allowed himself to be a tool. A cold hatred of the scoundrel was burning in him. The more he thought of it the greater was his anger.

Clint LePage was standing at the door of the cell when Malvern brought him his supper.

Before unlocking the door the jailer ordered him to go to the other end of the room and sit on the cot. He was not going to run the risk of having the prisoner attack him while the tray was in his hands.

"So you're scared of me," LePage sneered, and showed his yellow teeth in an ugly grin.

"I'm not scared of you," the jailer corrected. "But I wouldn't trust you any farther than I would a rattler. You stay put over there till I say, 'Come and get it.' I brought you a good steak and fried potatoes, kindness of Anse Cottrell. He said for you to enjoy your supper."

As Malvern stooped to put the tray on a bench the prisoner jumped to his feet, a revolver in his hand. The jailer dropped the tray and reached for his weapon. His fingers closed on the butt of the .45. He never got it out of the holster. A bullet tore into his side. The spread fingers of the left hand clutched at his heart. Malvern's body sank slowly to the floor. [*Turn to page 64*]

LOOSE FALSE TEETH?

The makers of POLIDENT offer you Double Your Money Back unless this

Amazing New CREAM Holds Plates Tighter, Longer THAN ANYTHING YOU EVER TRIED

POLI-GRIP

Double Your Money Back Unless it Gives You

MORE COMFORT, MORE SECURITY

THAN YOU EVER HAD BEFORE

Yes, the people who make Polident, the world's largest selling denture cleanser, are standing right behind their new adhesive cream, Poli-Grip, with an ironclad guarantee. You get double your money back, if Poli-Grip doesn't hold your plates tighter, longer than anything you've ever tried.

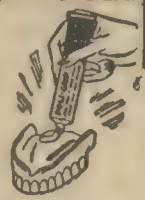
And that's not all. See if you don't find that Poli-Grip does all these wonderful things for you, too:

1. . . . form a cushion between your plate and gums to eliminate the friction that makes gums sore and raw.
2. . . . hold shallow lowers, despite lack of suction.
3. . . . seal the edges of plates so food particles can't get underneath to cause irritation.
4. . . . enable you to eat hard-to-chew foods in comfort, like steak, apples, celery, even corn-on-the-cob.
5. . . . give you full confidence to laugh, talk, sing without fear of embarrassment due to slipping plates.
6. hold plates tight even during strenuous sessions of coughing or sneezing.

Won't life be wonderful with all these torments behind you? Be sure to be among the first to learn the glorious comfort of holding loose false teeth tight and snug with Poli-Grip! Buy a tube at your drugstore as soon as possible.

Many tried powders, found they failed!

***Read what they say about this* new way:**



"For ten years my teeth wouldn't stay tight for more than two hours a day. I tried powders, but nothing worked till your new *cream*, Poli-Grip, came along."
Mrs. T. W., Medfield, Mass.

"Your new *cream*, Poli-Grip, is grand. My husband and I find it holds tighter than anything we've ever tried."
M. E. K., Somerville, Mass.

"I've been using powders, but still my teeth rocked and slipped. Then I tried your *cream*, Poli-Grip. It's better than anything I've ever used."
Mrs. O. H. B., Rockville, Conn.

"I like the wonderful holding strength of your new *cream* better than anything I've ever used. I like Poli-Grip's refreshing taste, too."
H. B. V., East Canaan, Conn.

"I never cared for the powders, but I do like your new *cream*, Poli-Grip. I find Poli-Grip so pleasant to use and it holds so long."
Mrs. W. J. A., Waltham, Mass.

Made and GUARANTEED by the makers of POLIDENT

LePage flung another slug into the stomach. It was not needed. The man was already dead. The prisoner glared down at him wolfishly. "You would have it," he snarled, and made for the door. While he was still on the stairs he heard a key turning in the lock of the front door.

A voice he recognized as that of the sheriff cried, "Something wrong inside." Others took up the alarm. The trampling of hurried feet came to him, the sound of men racing down the street.

The front door was flung open and Sheriff Walsh stood in the entrance, a six-shooter in his hand. LePage fired from a crouch, moving backward to the rear door. Walsh slumped against the jamb, steadied himself, and pulled the trigger an instant before the escaping man disappeared into the alley.

LePage raced for the live oaks. Once he was in the saddle he would streak out of town and make for the border. He reached the trees, to meet a shocking disappointment. There was no horse there!

BACK of a clump of brush he heard something moving. Past all reason now, he fired at the spot where the rustling had been. Anse Cottrell slipped out from the bush screen. The lead from his gun struck the fugitive in the hand. LePage stared at him in surprised horror for an instant then turned and fled. A bullet whipped through the leaves over his head.

The one urgency that drove LePage was his need of a horse. Without one he was lost. If he could reach a saloon unnoticed he would find one at a hitch-rack. To save himself he would have to skirt the danger zone around the courthouse square. It was getting dark and there was a chance he would not be recognized. But he had to hurry.

His zig-zag run brought him to the rear of Stump's store. It was closed. He could hear men moving along the sidewalk. A voice yelped, "Where's the killer at?"

Terror clawed at LePage's belly. The square was cut off from him.

In that moment while he stood there, uncertain which way to turn, he became aware that his hunters were coming down the alley. He edged away from them, clinging close to the wall, but in front of him was no hope since the alley ran into the street. Passing a lighted window, he looked into the room. A woman was moving about setting the table for her supper.

He opened the door, stepped inside, and covered the woman with his gun, at the same time drawing the window curtain. The door he bolted.

Nora Hamilton opened her mouth to scream, but his snarling order stopped the sound. "Don't you," he warned.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I'm in a jam. First off, pull the curtain of the front window." He added harshly, "And lock the door."

Nora had heard the shooting, but drunken cowboys were always venting their high spirits by firing into the air. It had become a matter of course to pay no attention to it. But this man LePage was in another class. Randy Sloan had been with her not fifteen minutes earlier and had told her of the latest developments.

The fellow must have broken jail and been wounded in making his escape. He had snatched a handkerchief from his pocket and was trying with one hand to stop the bleeding from the palm of it. Fear stared out of his eyes. He waved the revolver jerkily. The man's panic made him doubly dangerous.

Nora pulled the curtain and moved to the door. Her body was between him and it. She turned the key half way and then back, leaving the door unlocked.

"I'd better tie up that finger," she said quietly. Her heart was pounding fast, but she rode down her terror to keep it out of her voice.

He ripped out an oath of anger and self-pity. "That double-crossing sidewinder Cottrell was to have had a horse for me in the live oaks but he hid there and tried to ambush me."

"I'll get a basin of water and a cloth."

"If you cry out or make a move to get away I'll plug you," he threatened savagely. "They aim to string me up if they get me. Let 'em know I'm here and I'll drill you certain."

"You're safe enough here till the hunt dies down," she soothed. "I'm not going to do anything foolish."

As she dipped water from a bucket into a pan and got a strip of white cloth for a bandage she thought, I mustn't let him know how frightened I am. He is already half crazy.

She washed the hand and bandaged it neatly. The man could hardly stand still to let her look after the wound. He was jerky with nervousness and his fear-filled eyes shuttled from one door to the other anxiously. They could hear the evidences of excitement outside—the shuffling of feet, raised voices, doors slamming.

"Don't answer if anyone knocks," he warned.

"No," she promised. "You'll be safe here. But wouldn't it be better to surrender. They'll only put you back in jail."

"You talk like a fool," he growled. "I had to kill a man to get away. The lunkhead tried to stop me. It was self-defense. Yet they would croak me just the same."

She poured the bloodstained water from the pan into a slop pail and dropped into a waste basket the remnants of cloth left from the strip.

"If you are hungry I can get you some food," she said.

"Fix me a sandwich and a cup of coffee." The man's closely set eyes shuttled round the room, suspicion blended with the frozen fear in them.

THE stir in the street had lessened. Evidently the hunt had shifted to another area. But terror was still riding the man as he stood by the table eating wolfishly and gulping coffee.

A knock came at the front door. LePage's long body stiffened. He laid the cup down softly and his hand reached for the revolver. Out of the corner of his mouth he whispered, "Keep still." On tiptoe he softfooted back of the counter.

The rap on the panel came again. Nora looked at LePage, uncertain what to do. He shook his head.

The door opened and Randy Sloan walked in. LePage had ducked back of the counter. The dread in Nora's eyes told Randy that something was wrong. His glance fell on three drops of wet blood on the floor. They had not been there when he left. He saw coffee that had been slopped on the table from a half-filled cup. It jumped to his mind that LePage was in this room back of the counter. If either he or Nora made a false move the man would cut them down in their tracks.

Randy had come back to ease Nora's mind in case she was anxious about the disturbance. It had struck him as strange that she had not answered his knock. A murderous ruffian was on the loose, a fellow who had just killed one man and wounded another. It might be well for him to stay with her a while.

She said, "Did—did you forget something?"

"I thought all this noise outside might disturb you."

"I—I hadn't noticed it." Her fear-filled eyes fluttered to the counter and back. They were a complete give-away.

He said lightly, "I dropped in to tell you not to worry about the shooting. That fellow LePage has broken jail. He is being hunted. No need for you to be afraid though. He daren't fire a gun for fear of betraying where he is. In escaping he killed Malvern and wounded Walsh. If they caught him he would be hanged at once. My opinion is that he has picked up a horse and is racing for the border."

Nora knew that his casual words were for the hunted man back of the counter as much as they were for her. The urge crowding her was to get Randy out of the house. She knew how close the killer was to panic. He might fire any moment, and his first shot would be at Sloan.

"Nice of you to tell me." Her voice

trembled as she spoke. "But I am not afraid. I'll bolt both doors. You mustn't stay or folks will talk."

Randy laughed. "Come, come, you can't hand me my hat like that. You're my girl. You haven't forgotten that, have you?" His gaze fell to the drops of blood on the floor and rose to meet hers.

It told her he knew they were not alone. She had been almost sure from his first words that he had been aware of it. Her eyes begged him to go.

"I haven't forgotten anything, Randy," she said. "But we women have to keep up appearances. Please leave me now."

"I won't stay long," he promised. "But I haven't had any supper. You are just getting ready to eat. Fix a bite up for a tramp and give him a cup of coffee."

"You could go to Jim Wong's," she answered, though she had no hope that he would do so.

"Lady, I have never drunk your coffee and I'm going to find out how good it is." He tossed his hat on the sewing machine.

Drawing out a chair, he sat at the table facing the counter. Beneath the surface of his talk he was trying to work out a plan how he could capture LePage without endangering Nora. Probably the man would not surrender without a fight. His case was too desperate.

From back of the counter came a slight scuffling sound.

"You got a rat back there?" Randy asked. "If so, you ought to set a trap."

As Nora went into the kitchen for the coffee her worried eyes reproached him for his levity. The situation was so close to tragedy it terrorized her.

When she was out of the room Sloan slid his .45 from its holster and rested the arm that held it on the table. "You can come out of there with your hands up, Clint," he said quietly.

AFTER a moment of tense silence the hidden man's head shot up. Without taking time to aim he fired. His second shot and Randy's first crashed at the same time. The arms and shoulders of LePage slumped to the counter. His forefinger twitched, but with not enough force to pull the trigger. Slowly the body slipped out of sight.

Randy moved fast. He was not sure that LePage was dead. But as soon as he saw him lying back of the counter huddled on the floor with arms outflung he knew there was no longer life in him. A small hole in the forehead showed where the bullet had struck.

Nora stood in the kitchen doorway, her face ashen. She put a hand against the jamb to help support her.

"Oh, God!" she wailed softly. "I thought—"

Randy knew what she had thought. He took her in his arms and held her tight. "It's all right," he told her. "That's the way it had to be."

Her legs were weak and her body trembling. She clung to him.

The front door opened and men came into the house hurriedly. One was Cully Ducret. The Texan looked down at the body.

"You killed him?" he said to Randy.

"He had the first shot," Sloan replied. "I told him to hold up his hands. He didn't want it that way. You'll find his two bullets in the wall there."

Ducret stooped and picked up the gun. "Five shots fired," he said after checking. "Somebody must have got this gun to him." Surprise jumped to his voice. "It's Anse Cottrell's forty-five. How come LePage with it?"

That reminded Nora of what the hunted man had told her. "Mr. Cottrell was helping him, at least he thought so. He had promised to have a horse for him at the Live Oak grove but he was waiting there, hidden, and Cottrell wounded LePage when he showed up."

"Who told you that?" Ducret demanded, a terrible look in his eyes.

She looked down at the dead man. "He did, while I was bandaging his wound."

When Ducret spoke it was not so much to them as to himself. "Anse gave him a pistol so that he could kill another man if he had to, then waited in

the brush to murder him to keep him from talking. First Duff, now LePage." His concluding words were a murmur so low Sloan just caught them. "He has lived too long."

Men poured into the room, among them Richard Powell and Brad Webber. The sheriff's injury was only a flesh wound, but for the present he was incapacitated. The prosecuting attorney, after a short talk with the banker and Randy Sloan, decided to have Anse Cottrell arrested that night.

XVI

SCOWLING and restless, Anse Cottrell walked the floor of his office tortured by anxiety. He had intended to recover his revolver after killing LePage, but he had fired too soon and let him escape. Half the men in town were hunting LePage. If he was shot down resisting arrest that would be fine, but if he surrendered and talked it would be awkward.

The weapon that had destroyed the jailer could be identified as belonging to Anse and it would be hard to explain how it came into the possession of LePage since of course he must have been searched after his arrest. The story of an outlaw such as Clint could be discredited to a certain extent but there were some supporting facts that would be suspicious. Another thing that worried him was the disappearance of Anita Jelks. He had made some discreet inquiries but apparently nobody had seen her leave town.

He heard footsteps on the porch and stopped for a moment to listen. Somebody was coming into the house. His state of mind was so disturbed that this startled him, though probably it was no intruder but one of his relatives. He eased the revolver in its scabbard to make sure of an easy draw if necessary.

When Cully Ducret walked into the room he was relieved. He had never confided any dangerous secrets to the Texan and the man was faithful as an old hound dog. Anse slumped down into a chair at his desk.

"Have they caught Clint yet?" he asked.

"Randolph Sloan killed him." The gambler's inscrutable face was empty of expression.

"I wish it had been the other way round," Cottrell said in a burst of hatred.

"Yes, you would have liked that." Ducret's bleak eyes rested on the old man watchfully. "It was with your gun Clint killed Malvern. How did he get it?"

Cottrell showed astonishment. He glanced at the wall and appeared surprised the revolver was no longer there. "I never missed it till now," he said. "Somebody must have stolen it."

"Nobody stole it," Ducret answered, his voice quiet and very cold. "You gave it to him."

Anse was alarmed. He changed his story at once. "That is true. I can tell you because you will understand. The Sloans were going to frame Clint and I helped him to escape. I gave him the forty-five, but I cautioned him to use it only as a threat. He was a fool, but he was one of our friends and I had to stand by him."

"You freed him to kill him so that he wouldn't talk."

Cottrell felt the muscles tighten under his heart. "You ought to know me better than that, Cully," he said.

"You had me fooled a long time," Ducret told him. "I knew you were hard and revengeful and crazy for money, but I didn't know you were the kind would rat on one of your own crowd. You used me for a cat's-paw all these years while I kept you alive and you got other men to do the dirty work you knew better than to ask of me. You are too evil to live."

There were tiny beads of perspiration on Cottrell's forehead. "You're talking foolishness, Cully. We have been friends for years, you and I. No man ever lived more loyal to his friends than I."

"You gave LePage three hundred dollars to kill Joe Tubbs and tonight you lay in wait to murder Clint. Before

he died he accused you of wounding him."

"He must have been out of his head, Cully."

"I read tonight the statement of a witness who saw you shoot Dan Duff."

Cottrell felt inside him a dreadful crawling fear. "Some liar paid by the Sloans," he croaked.

The Texan's low voice sounded like inexorable doom to the cowering man. "A posse is on its way now to arrest you for the murder of Duff. You're finished."

"I'll get a lawyer. I'll prove—"

DUCRET cut his protest short. "No, you won't get a lawyer. I know your slimy ways. You would wriggle out of this somehow. It has struck twelve o'clock for you."

"No—no!" Cottrell cried. "Listen to me, Cully. You've got this all wrong."

"I have listened to you too long," the Texan answered. "It's a showdown. But I'm not like you. I'll give you a chance. I am going to back to the end of the room. While I'm doing it get out your cutter and get to smoking."

"Wait, Cully, wait. I haven't a gun on me. Don't do this, for God's sake." The old man's eyes narrowed to slits.

"Don't lie to me. You always pack a gun." Ducret was backing away slowly. His arms hung by his sides.

"Look. I'll show you." Anse tore open his coat. His hand moved as if to stress the point and came out gripping a revolver.

Ducret was watching him closely. It was said that no man in the West had so quick a draw as this Texan. Before Cottrell had pulled the trigger Ducret's .45 was out and blazing.

The weapon dropped from the hand of Anse. He had been shot through the heart but his body remained upright pinned between the chair and desk. The posse of three coming to arrest him found him there fifteen minutes later.

Ducret was at the livery stable saddling his horse. It was a long ride to the border.

Thirty minutes later Matt Chunn knocked at Nora Hamilton's door. "I got some news for you love birds," his falsetto voice announced.

Randy opened for him. "Come in, Matt. Be the first to congratulate me."

"Hmp!" the old man snorted. It was to Nora that he spoke. "So you got him."

"Yes," she answered, smiling at him. "If he doesn't rue back."

"I told you once, Nora, that I am a rock of Gibraltar," Randy said. "The first day we met."

"Yes." She slanted a supremely happy smile at him. "But I don't mind confessing to Matt that I am very glad Julia Cottrell is to be married so soon. To John Bancroft."

"She'll have to wear mourning at her wedding, I reckon," Matt mentioned.

"What do you mean?" Randy asked.

"Old Anse got himself killed about half an hour ago," Matt told them nonchalantly.

"Killed. Who killed him?"

"You'll be surprised. That quiet gent from Texas—Cully Ducret. Plumb through the heart. Anse had his gun out. Ducret told Monty Norris when he went down to the corral to saddle his horse. He's lit out. An unnecessary journey, I would say. The old devil had it coming."

Randy remembered the Texan's murmured words, "He has lived too long." He guessed that Ducret had shot him for his treachery.

"You can sleep in peace now, both of you. The war is over." Matt spoke to Randy severely. "You quit hellin' around, young fellow, and treat Miss Nora right."

Randy grinned. "I'm just bustin' with good resolutions, Matt."

"See you keep them. I introduced you to this girl and I feel responsible."

"Randy will treat me right, Matt," Nora told him with shining eyes. "If we live together fifty years there will never be a day I won't be glad I married him."

A rash prophecy, but it proved true.

■

Next Issue's Novel: BUGLES BEFORE DAWN by Gladwell Richardson

Close Shave for the Barber

By TEX GAINSVILLE

Bob Hunter's wits prove as keen as his razors!

IT was hot in the barbershop. All morning the blazing sun had been beating on the tin roof and weather worn boards of the small one story building. Bob Hunter stepped around to the right side of the customer in the barber chair and started working with the clippers.

"Sure is a scorcher, even for Texas in July," old Orrie Slack said from where he was sitting in one of the chairs over by the wall waiting for a shave. "Yes, sir, we've been having a stretch of right warm weather. Reminds me of the time I tangled with some Apaches out in the Badlands."

"Wait until Bob finishes cutting my hair before you start telling about your Indian fighting days, Orrie," Tom Neeley said impatiently. "I'm sick of hearing about it."

Slack glared at the big, heavy-set man in the barber chair, then picked up a week old newspaper and sullenly started reading. Hunter frowned and said nothing. In the year that had passed since he had come to this little cowtown and established his barber shop there, Bob Hunter had learned to hate this arrogant man whose hair he was cutting.

Tom Neeley owned the hotel, the saloon and a good many of the other buildings in the town of Gray Gulch. He had a way of making those he knew feel that he didn't consider them quite good

Hunter lifted the town boss and flung him at the card table

enough to associate with him. When he talked to you there always seemed to be a sneering note in his voice.

"It's a hot day, all right," Hunter said. "Believe it was Mark Twain who said, 'Everybody talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it.'"

"If you talked less, and did more work I'd probably get my hair cut much faster," Neeley growled. "I'm not in the least interested in your opinion of the weather, or anything else, Bob."

Hunter stepped back, a husky man in his early thirties. He put the clippers down on the shelf in front of the big mirror. He took the haircutting cloth off Neeley and tossed it aside.

"Told you the last time you were in here that I didn't need you telling me how to run my business, Neeley," Hunter said coldly. "And I meant it. Now get out of here and stay out!"

"You mean that you refuse to finish cutting my hair?" Neeley said, glaring at the barber in amazement.

"I do," said Hunter. "What you just said about my talking too much isn't so important, it is the way you keep saying things that gets a man riled. Those gunmen and the rest of the riff-raff you've got working for you have made you think you're a little tin god on wheels, but you sure aren't to me, Neeley. You're just a customer I can do without. Now get going!"

"Don't act like a fool, Hunter," Neeley snapped. "Finish cutting my hair if you know what's good for you. I'm the boss of Gray Gulch, and no cowtown barber is going to order me around. Now shut up and finish your work!"

Hunter stepped forward. He grabbed Neeley by the shirt front and yanked the big, heavy-set man out of the barber chair with a surprising display of strength. Neeley was on his feet, cursing when Hunter released his grip on the shirt and stepped behind the town boss.

Orrie Slack got to his feet with a grin and went to the front door of the barber shop and opened it wider. A moment later a human battering ram hit Neeley in the back and sent him out through the door with such force that he slipped as he stumbled across the plank walk and sprawled in the dust of the street.

"Now you've really hit him where it hurts the most, Bob," Slack said. "You've injured his dignity, and Neeley just can't stand that."

Neeley scrambled to his feet, brushed off the dust as best he could, and then shook his fist at the two men watching him from the doorway of the barber shop.

"I'll get you for this, Hunter," he shouted. "Yes, and you, too, Slack. You're both through in this town!"

NEELEY hurried on down the street toward his Full House Saloon and disappeared inside. Quite a few of the citizens of the town were out on the street and had seen what had happened, but they went on about their business.

"Sorry that he included you in this, Orrie," Hunter said quietly. "I didn't aim to get you in any trouble."

"Think I mind being among the folks Tom Neeley hates?" demanded the old former Indian scout with a grin. "I call it right flattering. If that buzzard figured I was his friend I'd feel bad about it."

"You're next," Hunter said, walking back to the barber chair. "If you still want a shave, Orrie."

"Course I want a shave," said Slack, getting into the chair. "Don't I always get one every other day, whether I need it or not?"

Hunter put a clean haircutting cloth around the old man, fixed a towel around Slack's neck and adjusted the chair so that Orrie was reclining in it. Then the barber took down Slack's own individual shaving mug from the rack of them on the wall, put in a small cake of soap, and then wet a shaving brush in a basin of water and started lathering the old man's face.

"I've got a feeling you haven't always been a barber, Bob," Slack said. "Though you never said anything about it one way or the other in the year that I've known you."

"You're right, Orrie," Hunter said.

"My father was a barber and taught me the trade when I was fourteen years old. Worked for him in his shop back East for a little over a year. Then he died. He had a bad heart. There was just the two of us. My mother had been dead for some years. After the old man was gone I got a hankering to go and see the West."

"Thought so," said Slack. "You walk and talk like a man who has spent a heap of time around cattle and horses."

"Maybe too much time," Hunter said, and a faint note of bitterness was in his voice.

The two men stopped talking as Hunter finished lathering and started shaving the old man in the chair. Memories came back to Hunter. He was remembering a fifteen year old kid getting a job on a ranch in Arizona where the men of the outfit were tough and cruel, and where he gradually learned that he had become part of a rustler bunch.

These men had died beneath the blazing guns of a sheriff's posse and Bob Hunter had just managed to escape with his life. There had followed fifteen years of working on ranches, of even riding dim trails where the hoot of an owl was not the call of the bird, but badmen's signal of danger—fifteen years during which a boy grew into a man and learned that those who could shoot fast and straight lived the longest.

Bob Hunter had grown weary of all that and had come here to this little cowtown in Texas and established his barber shop. Up to now it had been a peaceful sort of life, and he liked it. Most of the citizens of Gray Gulch were not only his customers, but his friends.

His was the only barber shop within fifty miles in any direction. The owners of the neighboring ranches and their cowhands got their haircuts there, and an occasional shave, so did the men of the town. Even Tom Neeley's bunch were casual customers. The bartenders, the gambler who worked as a house man at the saloon. The desk clerks at the hotel, all of them. Business was good.

Hunter had just finished shaving Orrie Slack and was wiping off the old man's face with a towel when five hard looking men stepped into the barber shop. Hunter knew them all. They were Neeley's gunslicks, and Slash Dexter was their straw boss.

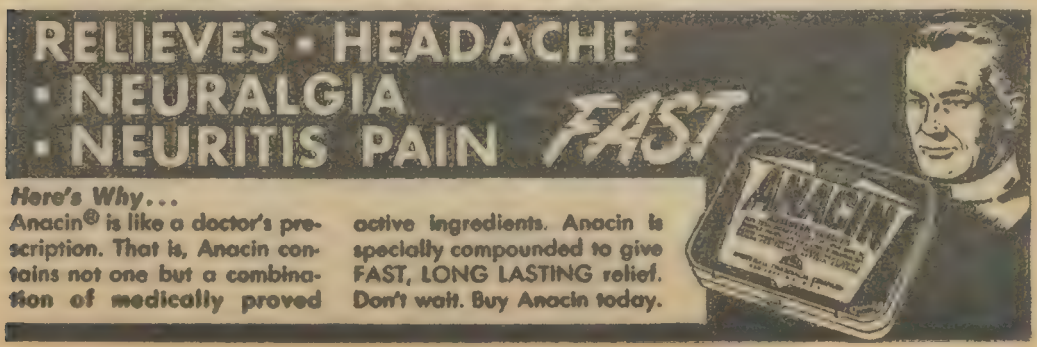
"You made a big mistake," Dexter said quietly. "You shouldn't have made the boss mad, Hunter. He didn't like it at all."

TWO of the other men moved so that they stood on either side of the door, their hands on the butts of the guns in their holsters. Hunter sprinkled some witchhazel on Slack's face. Then adjusted the chair so that the old Indian fighter was sitting up.

"There you are, Orrie," Hunter said, completely ignoring the five gunmen. He removed the towel and the cloth. "That'll be ten cents for a shave."

"Neeley said he will give you until sundown to get out of town, Hunter." Dexter stepped forward, a big man with a jagged scar from an old knife wound on his left cheek. "There won't be any reason for you to stay around."

[*Turn page*]


RELIEVES • HEADACHE
• NEURALGIA
• NEURITIS PAIN
FAST
Here's Why...
Anacin® is like a doctor's prescription. That is, Anacin contains not one but a combination of medically proved active ingredients. Anacin is specially compounded to give FAST, LONG LASTING relief. Don't wait. Buy Anacin today.
ANACIN

DEXTER drew his gun. He raked the long barrel over the rows of shaving mugs in the rack on the wall, knocking them to the floor. A second sweep of the gun sent all of Hunter's shaving tools to the floor.

"I sure admire a brave man," Hunter said as he watched. "Specially one who needs four sidewinders with guns to back him up when he starts wrecking a place. That takes real courage, when the man who owns the shop isn't even armed."

"This isn't my idea," Dexter said. "Orders from the boss. We just do what we're told to do."

Orrie Slack got out of the barber chair and moved quickly to one side, then stood with his back against the wall, watching. He wasn't wearing any gun.

"Just carrying out orders," Dexter repeated.

"I see," Hunter said. "And with the sheriff of this county located fifty miles away you can do as you please."

He leaned down and started picking his barber tools up off the floor. Dexter paid no attention to the barber but stood in front of Hunter staring at the big mirror.

"Seems kind of a shame to break that," Dexter said. "But orders are orders."

Abruptly Hunter lunged forward, a straight edge razor open in his hand. He grabbed Dexter from behind and pressed the sharp blade of the razor against the gunman's neck beneath his chin.

"Tell your men to get out of here or I'll cut your throat from ear to ear, Dexter," Hunter said grimly. "I'm not fooling!"

"Don't do it!" wailed Dexter in sudden terror. His body protected the barber from the other four men, so there was no chance of their shooting. "You heard what he said, men. Get out of here!"

"Make it fast if you want Dexter to live," Hunter snapped. "And when you get outside keep right on going."

The four other gunmen cursed as they hurried out into the street. They didn't linger outside, but went on along the plank walk toward the saloon. Slack stepped forward and snatched the gun out of Dexter's hand.

Hunter was still holding the razor at the gunman's throat.

"You can let him go now, Bob," Slack said. "I've got his gun and you both look kind of silly standing there that way."

"All right," Hunter said, releasing Dexter and stepping back. He folded up the razor and dropped it into a pocket of the barber's coat he wore. "Now you go back and tell your boss that I said that he and his five brave gunmen are to be out of town within an hour."

Dexter swung around and glared at Hunter. "You sure talk big all of a sudden," Dexter snarled. "And I'm wondering why?"

"Did you ever hear of Sudden Sloan?" Hunter demanded.

"Haven't heard of him for the last year or so," Dexter said. "Never seen him either—but from what folks say he's one two-gunman I wouldn't want to tangle with." A startled expression passed over his hard face. "Blazes! You mean that you are Sudden Sloan?"

"Figure it out for yourself," said Hunter.

"I—I better see the boss right away," Dexter said nervously, edging toward the door. "I'll tell Neeley what you said."

"Do that," said Hunter, as Dexter ducked out through the door.

"Sure has been a right interesting day up to now," Slack said. "And looks like it will keep on being just that."

"Stay here, Orrie," Hunter said, taking off his barber's coat. "I'll be right back."

He opened a rear door that led to his living quarters and disappeared. In not more than ten minutes he reappeared dressed in flannel shirt, levis and boots and wearing two guns in the holsters on the cartridge belts that were crossed around his waist. He wore no hat.

"Leaping bullfrogs!" exclaimed Orrie Slack staring at Hunter in amazement. "Are you really Sudden Sloan? I thought you were just running a whizzer on Dexter."

"Figure it out for yourself, just like I told Dexter," Hunter said with a grin.

"I've got to see some men about a barber shop."

He stepped outside and stood beside the red and white barber pole there with a sign on it reading, HAIRCUT 25c. From the direction of the saloon a gun roared and a bullet clipped off a lock of Bob Hunter's hair.

Instantly his two guns were in his hands. He fired at one of Neeley's gunmen who had taken a shot at him from in front of the saloon. The man pitched forward in the dust of the street and sprawled there motionless.

"Try to give me a haircut, will you," Hunter muttered.

THERE were horses, standing at the hitching-rail in front of the Full House Saloon—cowponies belonging to waddies from the local ranches who were in town. Dexter and the three other gunmen came rushing out of the saloon. They unfastened the reins of the horses and swung into the saddles. They knew that Sudden Sloan had the reputation of being the most dangerous gunman in all of Texas when it came to a shootout, and he was also a U.S. marshal.

The four gunmen rode out of town in a hurry, and Bob Hunter had a strong hunch that they would not be back. He grinned as he dropped his guns back into the holsters and started along the street toward the saloon. He glanced back and saw that Orrie Slack was following him at a distance.

Hunter reached the saloon and stepped in through the swinging doors. There was no one in the place but Tom Neeley and a stout, bald-headed bartender. Neeley rose to his feet from the table at which he had been sitting, a table at which a poker game had evidently been in progress for the cards and chips were still there.

Neeley was dressed as he usually was, in shirt and trousers, and he wore moccasins instead of cowboy boots. He wore no gun.

"You've got half an hour to get out of town, Neeley," Hunter said as he walked toward the town boss. "Got a feeling that folks are tired of you around this town, especially me."

"Take off those guns and we'll see who leaves town," Nealy snapped. "I can take you with one hand tied behind me."

Orrie Slack stepped in through the swinging door and stood there watching. He had the gun he had taken from Dexter thrust into the belt of his trousers. He glanced at the bartender.

"If them two want to fight, you and me are neutral, Pete," he said.

"We sure are, Orrie," said the fat man behind the counter.

Hunter unbuckled his gunbelts and placed them on a chair. As he did so Neeley made a wild dive at him. Hunter caught the town boss, lifted him clear off his feet and flung him toward the card table. Neeley struck against the table and nearly knocked it over, sending chips and cards to the floor.

"I've had enough!" he shouted as he got to his feet. "Anyone strong enough to do that could only be Sudden Sloan. You win, I'll get out of town right away."

He dashed through the swinging doors and disappeared from view out on the street. Orrie Slack shook his head sadly.

"When men run away like that, specially when they are supposed to be such tough hombres there's just no use in their trying to come back," the old Indian fighter said. "Their reputations are plumb ruined." Slack looked at Hunter and frowned. "You aren't Sudden Sloan," he said so low that the bartender could not hear him. "I remember seeing him one time and you don't look much like him."

"Never said I was Sloan," said Hunter. "Just told Dexter and you to figure it out for yourself."

"And Dexter sure figured it wrong," said Slack. "I thought they were going to get you though, Bob." He laughed. "Reckon you could call what's happened a close shave for the barber!"

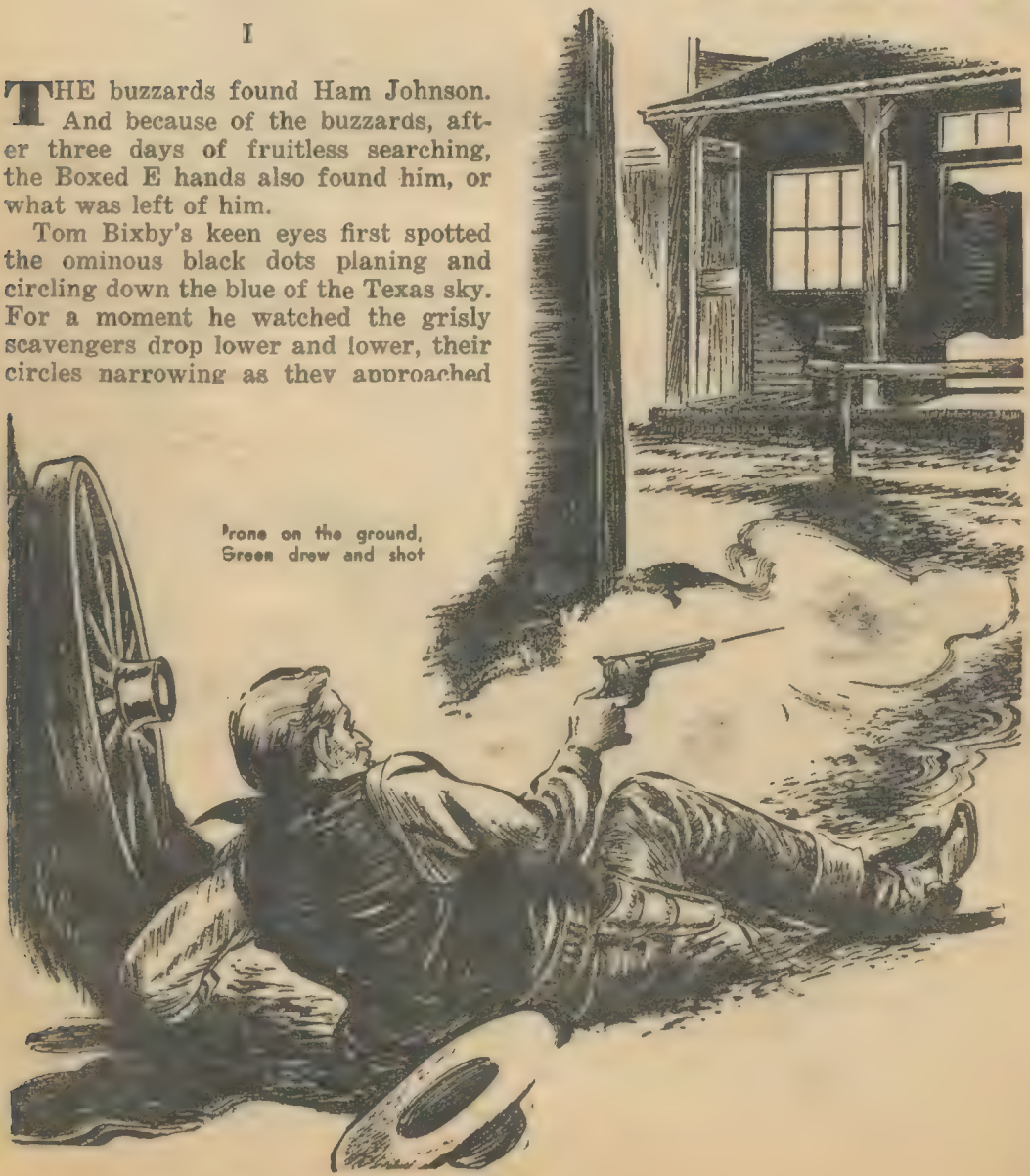
Coming Next Issue: FEAR BRANDED, a Novelet by WALT COBURN

THE Slick-Iron TRAIL

I

THE buzzards found Ham Johnson. And because of the buzzards, after three days of fruitless searching, the Boxed E hands also found him, or what was left of him.

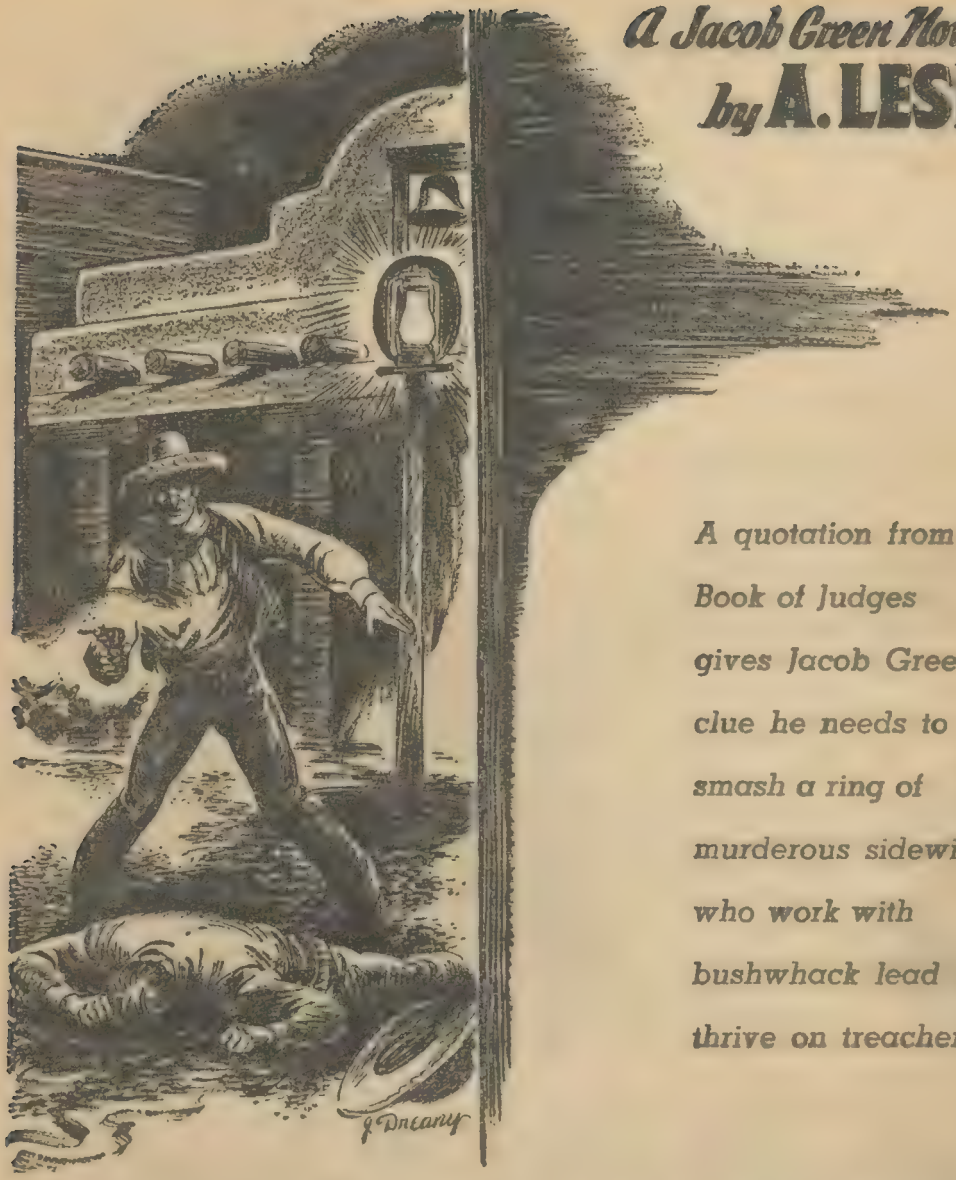
Tom Bixby's keen eyes first spotted the ominous black dots planing and circling down the blue of the Texas sky. For a moment he watched the grisly scavengers drop lower and lower, their circles narrowing as they approached



Prone on the ground, Green drew and shot

A Jacob Green Novelet

by A. LESLIE



A quotation from the Book of Judges gives Jacob Green the clue he needs to smash a ring of murderous sidewinders who work with bushwhack lead and thrive on treachery!

the ground. He waited another moment, then sent a shout echoing between the buttes and chimney rocks. He waited again, then drew his gun and fired three evenly spaced shots, the "come a-runnin'" signal of the rangeland.

Soon the horsemen scattered through the brakes began converging on Bixby. Those who heard his shout arrived first, but the others were not far behind, for they had not scattered overmuch, the morning being still young. They had arrived in a body at the desolate southwest pasture only a short time before. In a compact group they crowded around Bixby, their eyes fixed on the dark dots that sank lower and lower as they watched, to vanish one by one.

"Could be only a dead cow or something," muttered old Crane Willough-

by, "but it could be—" He did not finish the sentence.

"They're dropping into Shadow Canyon," remarked Bixby.

"And that's the other side of the nester holdings," another hand replied significantly.

A MOMENT of silence was broken finally by Bixby's quiet voice.

"No matter if it is," he said, "we've got to take a look-see. Buzzards will gather around a hurt man as well as a dead one. Besides, the fields ain't cultivated down here and nobody's apt to be around. We shouldn't have no trouble."

"We'll have to cut the wire," observed Willoughby. "Nobody bring along nippers? I know the Old Man ordered us not to pack 'em, but I figgered maybe —by gosh, if I ain't got a pair in my pocket right now! What you know about that? Must have forgot to lay 'em aside after I did that chore on the horse corral fence."

The others grinned, but did not otherwise comment. They gathered up their reins, and with Bixby in the lead, rode swiftly toward the tall barbed-wire fence less than a mile distant to the west. When they reached it, they paused to search the terrain with keen eyes. Nobody was in sight. The wire flowed northward past Shadow Canyon, past the northern tip of San Carlos hills to parallel the barren desert which the shrewdness and energy of the hated grangers had changed into a garden spot.

Willoughby dismounted and went to work on the wire. A few minutes later a panel was down. Through the opening rode the Boxed E bunch, six in number. They covered the nearly two miles to Shadow Canyon without incident and entered the gloomy gorge between its walls of dark stone. Only a few hundred yards farther and they sighted the buzzards, perched on boulders and branches, staring stonily at something on the ground.

"Dead horse," muttered Willoughby.

"And with the rig still on him," added Bixby. "That's a roan horse, Crane."

"And Ham was forkin' a roan horse when he left the *casa*, three days back."

"There's—there's somethin' on the ground beside the horse," one of the younger hands chattered nervously.

"Come on," Bixby barked tersely. "We've got to see this through."

Another moment and they were dismounting around the "something" on the ground beside the horse.

"It's Ham, all right," Bixby said quietly.

"And," added old Crane Willoughby in hard, metallic tones, "he's got a hole in his back."

"Uh-huh," agreed Bixby, "a bullet hole. Looks as if it went in there. Wait, I'll turn him over."

"Went in through the back is right," said somebody. "Breast bone is all smashed where the slug come out. Gun must have been held sort of close."

"Rocks a feller could hide behind ain't far off," said Bixby.

In stony silence the hands stared at Ham Johnson, whose hard face, after three days in the hot sun, was even less attractive than in life. Johnson, a surly, morose individual, had not been popular, but the tragedy of treacherous death suddenly endowed him with virtues not recognized when he was alive. And after all, he had been a Boxed E hand, and all cow outfits are notoriously clannish.

No, Johnson had not been popular with his fellow workers. He had been tolerated largely because of his friendship with Bert Fisher, the Boxed E range boss. The boys respected Fisher for his ability as a cowman and his almost uncanny skill with gun and knife. He was not much of a mixer and kept largely to himself aside from his companionship with Johnson, his bunky, but he was just in all his dealings with his men and always ready to do a favor.

"The best range boss I ever had or ever expect to have," old Eldon Parr, the Boxed E owner, was wont to declare. "Knows the cow business from start to finish. Handles all my book work for me, which is a big help. Drives a better bargain with buyers than I was ever able to. And just think of it, he was

nothing but a chuck line rider when him and Ham Johnson ambled along right after Bill Bledsoe pulled out for Arizona and I needed a good man to run things. Knowed right off he was a eddicated feller with plenty of come-uppance. I may not have much book learning, but I sure know folks. Don't often make a mistake. Sure didn't make none this time."

The silence around the body was broken by Crane Willoughby's curses as he shook his fist to the north.

"This settles it," he stormed. "Them infernal nesters has got to be run out. What if Ham did happen to be on their land? He was an open range man and used to follerin' mavericks wherever they got to. Must have seen cow tracks leading over this way. Fences get busted, everybody knows that. Wasn't no excuse for drygulchin' him this way."

The others nodded sober agreement, their faces set like granite.

"Well," said the matter-of-fact Bixby, "reckon it's up to us to pack him back to the spread. Load him on my horse and rope him tight—behind the saddle. Smoky will pack a load. Let's go."

JACOB GREEN

GINGERLY they lifted the dead man and made him fast to Bixby's big moros. Then they mounted and gathered up their reins. They were just setting out down the canyon when something yelled through the air over their heads. Echoing that lethal screech came the whip-lash crack of a distant rifle.

"Ride," roared Bixby. "Some hellion's throwing lead at us from up top the cliff!"

Even as he spoke, the unseen rifle cracked again. A cowboy yelled shrilly and reeled in his hull, clutching at the horn for support with his right hand. His left arm swung limp, blood streaming from his fingertips. Another whip-lash report and Bixby's hat spun from his head. As they charged down the canyon still another screeching slug nicked old Willoughby's shoulder. Then they were around a bend and out of range. Yelling curses, they tore from the canyon mouth and across the open range to the fence. Before they reached it, two more bullets whined a derisive farewell over their heads.

"I'm going back and smoke that sneaking cuss out!" stormed the puncher with the wounded arm. "The crawlin' sidewinder! I'll fill him so full of holes he'll starve to death from leakin' out his vittles."

"You'll keep right on riding," Bixby told him grimly. "You'd have about as much chance with that holed-up hellion as a rabbit in a houndawg's mouth. They took this trick. What we've got to do is organize and clean out that whole nest of snakes. Sift sand. You need a doctor."

Old Eldon Parr, the Boxed E owner, sent word of the killing of Johnson to Sheriff Chuck Lawlor at Maley, the county seat. The cowhand who brought the message fortified himself with a few slugs of red-eye before visiting the sheriff. After telling what had happened, he allowed that the cowmen of

the section aimed for a showdown with the farmers and mighty soon.

Young Sheriff Lawlor swore wrathfully at the prospect of bad trouble in the far southwest corner of his great county which was larger than some eastern states. He read the cowboy a lecture on the dangers of taking the law into his own hands and sent him back home with a warning for Eldon Parr and others. Then he hurried to Jacob Green's big general store.

"Uncle Jake, there's the making of another Lincoln county war down there," he declared, "and we don't need anything like that in Texas. Eldon Parr is a salty hombre. The feller who got killed was a sidekick to his range boss, Bert Fisher. And Fisher is a cold proposition if there ever was one. That puncher who brought the word said Fisher is pawin' sod for fair and Parr is ready to back him up in anything he aims to do. And those farmers are plenty salty, too. They're mostly from Kentucky and Tennessee and can dot the eye of a rattlesnake at thirty paces with them long rifles of theirs. I can't spend all my time down there holding them two bunches apart. I've got other troubles on my hands. What in blazes am I going to do?"

Jacob Green closed the book he was reading and looked concerned.

"Just what is the set-up in that section, Chuck?" he asked. "Why are the farmers and the cowmen on the prod against each other? Did the farmers squat on open range?"

"No," growled Lawlor, "they didn't. That's why the whole thing don't make sense. About three years back the farmers rolled into that section. They didn't try to take over cattle range. Instead, they met with old Eldon Parr and dickered with him for what everybody thought was a plumb worthless stretch of desert land. Parr was glad to sell, and he figgered he'd put over a smart deal on the dumb grangers.

"But those farmers knew what they were about. Reckon they'd investigated on the quiet before they rolled in. Anyhow, they found out that under a thin skin of sand was plumb good soil that only needed water to grow fine crops. They went to work and damned a creek up a canyon where a worthless old coot used to run a few cows before Parr took over the holdings. They got a good head of water and proceeded to irrigate that patch of sand and rocks. Now they're growing as good crops as you'll find anywhere in the state and getting plumb prosperous. They made the cowmen look silly. Reckon that didn't set any too well with Eldon Parr who's the big wolf of the cowmen in that section."

"And just because of that, Parr started a row with them?" Jacob Green asked in surprise.

"Well, no," Lawlor replied, "although I reckon the friction arising over the deal sort of set things off. Seems there were a few rows between the cowhands and some of the younger farmers. Then about a year back, the cowmen commenced losing considerable cows. Right off they blamed the farmers. Next a couple of barns and a few haystacks owned by the farmers got burned somehow. Then there was a few more ruckuses, not particularly serious, when members of the two bunches met in Aguila, the town down there. The farmers began saying *they* were losing cattle. It all might have toned down after a while if it wasn't for this killing. Johnson was shot in the back on land owned by the farmers but not used by them as yet. It's a mess."

JACOB GREEN soberly agreed that it was. For some moments he sat lost in thought. Chuck Lawlor waited without speaking. He had learned to respect Uncle Jake's silences, knowing that out of them eventually came shrewd words of wisdom.

Jacob Green was a rather small man with shoulders deceptively broad and a depth of chest not apparent at first glance. He was lean and wiry in build. His hands were finely shaped with a swelling of muscle under the smooth skin. His hair, sweeping back in a glorious crinkly mane from his big dome-shaped forehead was white. Near white also was his short beard. His kindly

face was deeply lined but his brown eyes were keen and bright and his movements denoted youthful vigor. A wanderer over the earth in search of that which is more precious than life itself —freedom of thought and expression and the privilege of self-government— here in this land of great distances and rugged beauty, he had found his place.

Soldier, sailor, miner, cowhand, he had lived lustily. He had been one of the famous Sieber's scouts. Now he was a prosperous storekeeper, liked and respected by his neighbors, sought out when they were beset by trouble or perplexing problems. He smiled up at the tall young sheriff, and fingered the pages of his book.

"Chuck," he said in a meditative voice, "in the Old Testament—Book of Judges—there is a story that starts with one of the great captains of my people—Gideon. Gideon was an able man and a good one, but when he died he left an off-side son named Abimelech who was plumb ornery but salty and cunning. He didn't seem to amount to much, but as soon as his dad took the Big Jump he got busy stirring up trouble till he had various factions plumb on the prod against one another. Then just at the right time he stepped in and got himself made king of the country."

"Plumb come out on top, eh?" remarked Lawler. "What finally happened to him?"

"Oh, in the course of one of his ornerinesses, a woman dropped a rock on his head from the top of a tower and busted it wide open," Jacob Green replied.

"Got his come-uppance at last, like that sort usually does," chuckled Lawler. "I think I get the point, Uncle Jake. Abimelech tied onto what he was after by havin' folks row with each other till it was easy for him to take over. You figger that's what might be going on down to the southwest?"

"Could be," agreed Jacob Green.

"But for the love of Pete who could be doing it?" demanded Lawlor. "So far as I can learn, there's nobody down there but the cowmen and the farmers."

"Well," smiled Jacob Green, "I reckon it's up to us to find out." He stood up, stretching his unusually long arms above his head. "Chuck," he said, "I've been sitting around here for quite a spell. Feel as if I were taking root. Got a notion a little trip would do me good."

Lawlor chuckled. "Down to the southwest?" he suggested rather than asked.

"I've heard it's an interesting section," Jacob Green replied.

Lawlor chuckled again. "After all, you're one of my special deputies," he said. "Uncle Jake, I'm feeling better already."

After the sheriff departed, Jacob Green gave some orders to one of his clerks, a young Mexican named Pedro. The clerk grinned and hurried out. Jacob Green repaired to his back room and closed the door. Very soon his neat black suit was replaced by faded overalls, soft shirt and sagging vest. Heavy black guns sagged in carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters suspended from double cartridge belts encircling his lean waist. A battered old "J.B.," and the former Sieber scout had replaced the Maley storekeeper. Jacob Green glanced at his reflection in a mirror and chuckled.

"Reckon I look as much like a desert rat as the next one," he told himself cheerfully. "Well, I have been one, and I always did like prospecting. Understand there's metal in the hills down to the southwest."

Jacob Green rode out of town as dusk was falling. He attracted no attention, for long rides were his habitual recreation. The good town-folk would have been somewhat surprised, however, if they could have followed him a couple of miles to where Pedro was waiting. Pedro held the lead rope of a small mule upon whose back was diamond-hitched a hefty pack. From the pack protruded the handle of a miner's pick.

"*Adios, Capitan,*" chuckled Pedro, "and may you find much gold."

II

ELDON PARR, owner of the great Boxed E spread, was in a very bad tem-

per indeed. He sat on the veranda of his ranchhouse, rumbling profanity under his mustache and glowering across his broad acres toward where the ragged hills of the Aguila Desert cut the western skyline.

In the little office just off the porch and within conversational distance of where Parr sat, Bert Fisher, tall, well formed and good looking, busied himself over estimates and accounts. Now and then a fleeting ghost of a smile moved his tight lips as old Eldon's torrid thoughts became vocal.

Parr continued to glower into the west, but a birth of movement where the nearby trail curved around from the northeast slid his glance in that direction.

Just rounding the bend, forking a tall bay horse and leading a burdened mule was a white-bearded old fellow who had "prospector" written large all over him. Parr watched him come opposite the veranda and pull up, glancing toward the ranchhouse in a questioning way.

Eldon Parr turned no man from his door. Now his bull's bellow of a voice rang out hospitably—

"Light off, old timer, and cool your saddle. Come on up and set. Be chuck on the table most any minute now. Say, that's a plumb fine cayuse you're riding. I'll have a wrangler take care of him, and your mule. Come along."

As the prospector approached the veranda, Parr decided from the lithe swing of his stride that, though no yearling, he was not as old as the white hair and beard led one at first to believe. Parr waved him to a chair and raised his voice again.

"Manuel!" he shouted.

Steps sounded inside the house. An old Mexican wearing a snowy apron appeared.

"Manuel, call Pete and tell him to look after those critters," Parr directed. "And set another place at the table. We got company."

The Mexican nodded. His glance shifted to the unexpected guest. He started visibly and his eyes widened.

Jacob Green's head moved from side to side the merest trifle. Instantly the cook's countenance became wooden.

"*Si, Patron,*" he murmured and vanished into the house.

Old Eldon turned to his guest. "Where you headed for, feller?" he asked.

Jacob Green gestured to the west. "Hear tell there's metal in them hills over there," he said. "Figure I'd give 'em a whirl."

"I've heard that too," Parr admitted. "But you'll be darn lucky to get there," he added, his face darkening.

"How's that?" asked Green.

"'Cause you'll hafta pass across the holdings of them darn nesters over there and they're liable to do most anything to you out of pure darn cussedness," Parr growled. "There ain't nothin' them hellions won't do."

"Been having trouble with 'em?" Green asked in interested tones.

"Plenty," grunted Parr. "Things ain't been the same hereabouts since they landed in this section. I'd ought to have knowed it from the start and kept 'em out."

"Squatted on your land?"

"Nope," Parr was forced to admit. "I sold 'em land, like a darn fool."

Jacob Green looked interested and sympathetic. There was something about him that invited confidences, and Parr appeared to be in a mood for talk.

"It was like this," he explained, "about three years back they showed in this section. Nacherly the boys had an eye on 'em right away, but they didn't try to take over anything. They camped just outside of town and the he-wolf of the pack, an old feller named Higgins, rode over to see me. Said he wanted to buy that strip of desert land over to the west, which was part of my holdings. I sold it to him. Figgered he was plumb loco, but reckon he wasn't. First thing we knowed the hellions was running water over the patch of sand and growing fine crops. Prime alfalfa and as good a stand of wheat as you can find anywhere in the state. Making plenty of dinero, I figure, with good shipping facilities not so far off. Uh-huh, they sure put one over on me, all right."

"Didn't tell you they could make the land good, eh?" remarked Green.

"That's wrong," Parr admitted. "Higgins said there was good soil under the sand. Said all it needed was water. I told him that's all hell needed to give it a good climate. He laughed at that and 'lowed they'd build a dam in Horse Creek Canyon and get the water they needed. The whole scheme sounded loco to me and I told him so. But he insisted he was right and offered me what I considered more than a fair price for the land. So I let him have it. Well, the way it turned out, he was right and I was wrong. I thought I was putting over a smart deal, but it was Higgins and his nesters who were smart. I didn't take to being bested in a deal, but I could have put up with that. Business is business and it's a game in which the smartest jigger comes out on top. But stealing my cows, burning my hay stacks and beating up my boys in town is something else!"

"Catch 'em stealing your cows?" Green asked.

"Nope," Parr was forced to admit. "Can't catch 'em at anything. They're too darn smart. But who else would be doin' it? We ain't had no widelooping or other trouble for years till they showed up."

GREEN looked meditative. "You say the farmers are making good money from their land?" he asked.

"That's right," Parr agreed.

"Looks funny that they'd take a chance on big trouble just for what they could get out of rustled cows," Green observed.

"Nesters is just nacherly ornery," Parr declared. But it seemed to Green that his voice lacked a shade in conviction. A moment later, however, he was frowning blackly.

"Right now," he stated with vigor, "every one of my hands is out on the range fencing waterholes. Yesterday we counted seventy-two prime beefs stretched out cold around 'em. The Walkin' R over to the east lost more than fifty and I reckon the same thing happened to the other spreads in the section. Ain't got reports as yet."

"Holes pizened?"

"You're darn right they were pizened," growled Parr. "A plumb mercy they can't pizen the creeks or us cowmen would be out of business in a hurry. Well, we've stood all we intend to stand. We're going to fight back and when it's over there won't be no nesters in this section, you can bet on that."

At this juncture, Manuel's voice sounded, calling them to dinner.

Parr stood up, his chair creaking under his broad bulk. "Come on, Bert," he shouted. "Chuck's on."

A tall young man with a tight, thin-lipped mouth and straight features appeared in the doorway of the office. His keen, alert eyes went over Jacob Green from head to foot in an all-embracing glance.

"This is Bert Fisher, my range boss," Parr introduced. "I'm Eldon Parr."

Green supplied his own name and they shook hands all around. Fisher's grip was steely and he appeared to have a habit of impressing the other men with the fact. But as Jacob Green's sinewy fingers coiled about his, it was Fisher who winced slightly. His eyes narrowed a little as their hands fell apart.

The meal was a good one and Jacob Green ate with the relish of a man who has known of late what it is to find good food scarce. Manuel pottered about, attending to the wants of the diners.

"Going to spend the night with us?" asked the hospitable Parr as he poured more coffee.

"Figured to ride on to town and spend the night there," Jacob Green replied. He raised his eyes as he spoke, met Manuel's gaze, and held it an instant. The cook inclined his head in a swift, barely perceptible nod and departed for the kitchen.

"Want to sort of get the lowdown on the country before I move on," Green explained further. "Want to buy some things I'll need for a stay in the hills."

"Hope you make a strike," said Parr. "Drop in any time you're a mind to. Like to talk with you."

Fisher was through eating first and rose to his feet. "I've finished those accounts," he told Parr, in his quiet, modulated voice. "I'll ride out on the spread and see how the boys are coming along with those fences. We don't want to lose any more cows." With a nod he left the room.

"A fine young feller," said Parr, pouring Green another cup of coffee. "Come riding over from El Paso way a little over a year back, him and another feller named Johnson. I took 'em both on and found out mighty soon that Bert was a tophand for fair. Before the month was out I'd made him my range boss, and I ain't never regretted it. He's plumb smart. Just about runs the spread now and he does all my book work. I ain't got no eddication to speak of and that was always a mighty tough chore for me, but Bert don't pay it no mind. Don't know what I'd do without him."

Jacob Green's face was grave as he rode away from the ranchhouse, headed for Aguila, fifteen miles to the west. The situation was even worse than he had anticipated and ready at any moment to burst forth in death and destruction.

"Chuck Lawlor should have sent for Rangers to keep things under control here," he told himself. "But I'm afraid there isn't time for that now. Who in blazes is back of all this? The whole thing doesn't make sense. Parr seems to be a right old jigger. Reckon I'll have to try and learn a mite more about the farmers. There may be some rapscallion among them who is stirring things up for reasons of his own."

When Jacob Green reached Aguila, just as dusk was falling, he decided it was considerable of a town, evidently the headquarters of the cowmen of the section. He found a stable for his horse and mule and sleeping quarters for himself over a restaurant in which he enjoyed a good meal. After eating, he ambled out to give the town the once-over. Very quickly he became much concerned over the angry comment with which every place he visited seethed.

"Fifty-seven with their toes turned up on the Bar L," a cowboy in the Ace-Full saloon was declaring as Green entered. "And a couple of dozen on the Bradded H. The Triangle X lost some, too, and everybody knows how Eldon Parr's Boxed E caught it. And right on top of Ham Johnson's drygulching. It's a wonder to me that Bert Fisher ain't already rode west with his bunch for a showdown."

"Fisher is a mighty level-headed feller," remarked another puncher. "He's been holding his boys in, I hear. Says to let the law take care of things."

"He's plumb loco," snorted a third rider. "What's the law been doing all this time? Chuck Lawlor ain't good for nothing but to warm the seat of his pants in an office chair. And the Rangers is too all-fired busy along the Border to pay any attention to local ruckuses like this one. Fellers, I tell you it's up to us."

III

AS the night wore on, ominous with impending events, Jacob Green grew more and more concerned. Something was due to bust loose at any minute he felt certain. But what?

"Sure wish Manuel would show up," he told himself. "But reckon he won't be able to get away until well after dark, and it's a fifteen-mile ride. I sure got a lucky break by running onto him at Parr's place. Mexicans, and especially cooks, hear things. Nobody pays much attention to a cook and folks talk without noticing they're around, and say things they wouldn't in somebody else's presence. Manuel may know something worth while."

Another hour passed. Green was in a big saloon near the west end of the town when suddenly a wild shouting sounded outside, and a burst of gunfire. Without giving the appearance of hurrying, Green was the first in the room to reach the street. Cowboys were shooting into the air and whooping deliriously. Everybody was staring westward toward the desert hills.

The whole sky above the hills was

alight with an angry red glow that mounted higher with astonishing rapidity. Green watched it, perplexed. It was a fire, all right, and a big one. Too big for a building, or even a group of buildings, he swiftly decided. And it was not the racing flicker of a grass fire speeding before the wind.

"Guess that'll teach the hellions a lesson!" a half drunk cowboy whooped, and Green understood. He recalled Parr's statement that the farmers' chief crop was wheat, which even now was nearing harvest.

"But how in blazes did they manage to set a big fire like that?" he wondered. "Surely the fields are guarded. Looks like it was set in a dozen places all at once."

His kindly brown eyes grew hard as he watched the mounting glow.

"Cattle killed, grain destroyed," he muttered. "The things men have worked and sweated for going to hell in rot and smoke. It certainly is time something was done."

He followed the crowd that hurried to the outskirts of the town for a better view of the fire, and watched till the red glow died and vanished, as it swiftly did when the stand of grain was consumed.

The crowd drifted back to the saloons and the end of the dimly-lighted street was deserted. Deserted save for the former Sieber scout and two sinister shadows that lurked and waited where the dark clustered thickly in the gloom of a shuttered building. Jacob Green turned to retrace his steps, instinctively glancing left and right with keen eyes that missed nothing.

It was that instinct, developed through long years of riding with deadly danger as a constant stirrup companion that saved him. That and the glint of light from a lantern hung on a pole at the corner reflecting on shifted metal.

Green was going sideways as the hidden gun boomed. A burning pain shot through his left arm as he went down. Prone on the ground, he drew and shot from the hip, lacing bullets at the flash of reddish flame. He heard a choking grunt, a thud, and a yelp of pain. Lead stormed about him. He fired at the flashes, heard a Spanish curse, then the thud of racing feet receding into the farther dark.

He sent two more shots in the direction of the sound and scrambled erect, weaving and ducking and stuffing fresh cartridges into his empty gun. Crouching in the shadow, he peered into the darkness by the building wall. Nothing moved there. He crept forward until he could make out something lying on the ground close to the wall. Another furtive step and he identified the clump of solider shadow as the body of a man. He glided forward, gun ready, and bent over the huddled form.

"Dead, all right," he muttered. "Must have gotten him plumb center." He straightened up and listened. Far down the street he could hear the sounds of hilarity. But nobody hove into sight. Evidently the shooting had attracted no attention in the general uproar. Green struck a match, cupped it in his hands and surveyed the dark, ferocious countenance of the dead man.

"Mexican, or so most folks would say," he muttered. "Really almost pure-blood Apache. Now what in blazes? How did I slip up, anyhow? Somebody spotted me almighty quick, and I'd have swore nobody down in this section knew me. A good try, and came nigh onto being successful. Got him right between the eyes. Nicked the other one, I'd say, judging from the way he yelped. Wonder if this hellion has anything on him worth looking over?"

He swiftly turned out the dead man's pockets, revealing nothing of significance. Suddenly, however, his sensitive fingertips dug deep into a lining running back and forth across the dusty seam. He raised a finger to his lips muttered under his breath. Then with a wrench he tore the pocket free, folded it and stowed it away. He straightened up, wincing as a stab of pain shot through his left arm. He explored the wound with his finger, flexed the injured member.

"Knocked a hunk of meat out, all right," he muttered. "Nothing much, but should be taken care of. Can't afford to chance infection. And I don't want to go to a doctor. Come to think of it, I passed a drugstore on the way over here. I'll get some stuff there and take care of it myself."

LEAVING the dead man for the citizens of Aguila to puzzle over in the morning, he hurried back along the street, located the drugstore and entered. The druggist, a fat man with a slabbing mouth and furtive eyes, shot him a suspicious glance.

"A roll of bandage and some antiseptic ointment," Green requested.

The druggist made no move to fill the order. His eyes, still suspicious, rested on Green's somewhat nondescript garb.

"You a farmer?" he asked.

"No," Green replied, "I'm a miner. Why?"

" 'Cause I don't sell to farmers, that's why," the druggist grunted. "Nobody in this town does any more. They do their buying at Terlingua, ten miles to the north of here. This is a cowman's town."

"Well, I ain't a farmer, and I ain't a cowman," Green replied. "Hurry up and rustle that stuff for me."

Grumbling, the druggist moved to obey. He passed Green the package, accepted payment. Green was struck by a sudden thought.

"I'll take a couple of pounds of arsenic, too," he said. "Aim to do some trappin' over in the hills and I'll need it to cure the pelts."

The druggist started slightly, and again his shifty eyes filled with suspicion.

"I don't handle poison," he growled.

"Funny, drugstores usually do," Green said in surprised tones. "Where can I get some?"

Again a momentary hesitation, and another shifty glance. "Reckon you can get it at Terlingua," the druggist replied grudgingly, at length. "They got a wholesale place up there that handles most everything."

"Much obliged," Green said, and left the store. He resumed his round of the various saloons and gambling places, hoping to encounter Manuel. He had about given up, deciding that the Mexican had been unavoidably detained at the ranch, when in the Ace-Full he found the old cook. They took a table in a quiet corner and Green ordered drinks.

"Capitan," said the cook, "it is most good to see you again. You have changed but little in the years since you saved my life that terrible day in Elazario."

"You haven't changed much, either, Manuel," Green returned. "And I'm mighty glad to see you, too. What do you know about the hell-raising going on here?"

"But little, Capitan," the Mexican replied. "Strange things happen, but their meaning I cannot understand."

"You think Eldon Parr is back of it?"

Manuel shook his head decidedly. "The *patron* would not do such things," he declared with conviction.

"Anybody else you can think of?"

Manuel hesitated. "I have thought at times that Senor Johnson who was killed in Shadow Canyon might have been responsible," he replied. "He was a strange man who talked not at all and who always appeared to be watching over his shoulder. Men of my blood used to come to talk with him at night, with him and the Senor Fisher in the little office, when the *patron* slept. Of what they talked I know not. But afterward those dark ones would steal away into the darkness. And once I heard the Senor Fisher talking with Johnson. It seemed that Johnson wished to leave the section.

" 'Rangers are coming here, the way things are going,' he said, 'and I don't want them looking me over.' "

"And what did Fisher say to that?" Green asked, deeply interested.

"He said," replied Manuel, " 'You're not pulling out till I give the word. And don't you try it, or it will be too bad for you.' Then the Senor Johnson cursed, but he did not argue."

"Manuel," Green said at length, "is there anything in Shadow Canyon that you know of that would have given

Johnson a reason for riding in there, on the farmer's land?"

"Nothing of which I have ever heard," said Manuel. "It is but a narrow canyon that runs through the hills to the desert beyond."

Green pondered again. "Reckon a feller could make it to Mexico by way of that desert?"

"Si," Manuel admitted. "Beyond the desert, which is not wide, is a trail that leads to the great river and beyond."

Green finished a drink and ordered them another.

"Hightail back to the ranch," he told his companion. "Keep your eyes skun and your ears open. You may learn something. I'll be hanging around town for a few days. I sleep over the Golconda restaurant. Be seeing you."

* * * * *

In his room over the restaurant, Green treated the flesh wound in his arm, which he decided was of small consequence. Then, after a good wash, he sat down on the bed and began drawing off his fancily stitched riding boots. Suddenly he paused, one of the boots in his hand.

"By gosh, this is it!" he exclaimed aloud. "My boots. That's where I slipped up. I neglected to change 'em. And they're not the sort a prospector would wear—not with these high heels. Well, somebody sure has got a pair of eyes that miss nothing. Now, I wonder?"

Thinking about it, he went to bed yet was almost instantly asleep despite the noise in the street beyond his open window.

IV

JACOB GREEN rode west the following morning, following the trail that at first flowed across the rangeland but finally ran between the wire fences of the farmlands. He eyed the standing crops with appreciation. He in turn was eyed by gaunt, silent men who watched him until he was out of their sight. He knew he was an object of suspicion, as was any stranger, but felt that he had nothing to fear so long as he kept riding and made no overt move.

Closer and closer drew the gray monotony of the desert beyond the farmlands, ominous, sinister. But before he reached it, he saw an even more sinister coloring—the black expanse of the burned-over field. He shook his head at its extent.

Farmers were working around the field, repairing fences, cleaning up the rubbish. They paused from their labors as Green approached. Finally he pulled up alongside the scorched fence and waited.

A tall old man disengaged himself from a silent group and strode forward. The farmer was alert and suspicious, but there was that in the twinkling brown eyes and lined, kindly face of the man sitting the tall bay horse that dispelled suspicion and replaced it with trust. Green nodded. The farmer nodded back.

"Sort of figgered to do some prospecting in the hills over to the west," Green explained. "Stopped to look things over. 'Pears you had a bad fire."

"It was all of that," the farmer returned grimly. "Could have been worse, though. The furrows we got plowed between fields stopped it before it could spread. Lucky there wasn't much wind last night."

"How was it set?" Green asked.

The farmer shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Got a mighty good notion who set it, but how they did it is plumb beyond me and everybody else," he replied. "It seemed to start in a dozen places at once and went streaking across the field here and there and everywhere. Never saw anything like it. Some of the boys said they heard horses right after it was set—night was mighty dark—but we was too busy tryin' to hold it to this field to try and foller 'em."

Green nodded, his eyes thoughtful. "You were guarding the field, of course," he remarked.

"That's right," said the farmer. "Don't look possible for the hellions to get over in there and start the fire in a

dozen places at once, but they did."

Green looked ever more thoughtful, and decidedly puzzled. "Mind if I look things over a bit?" he suggested. "I've seen a fire or two in my time. Might hit onto something."

The farmer hesitated, then appeared to come to a decision. "All right," he said. "You look to be considerable of a feller. My name's Higgins—Jethro Higgins."

Green supplied his own name and they shook hands. With the farmer walking parallel to him on the far side, he rode slowly along the fence, searching the burned-over terrain with his keen eyes.

"What's that?" he asked suddenly, pointing to something that looked like a bundle of scorched fur.

"Coyote," replied Higgins, poking the object with the toe of his boot. "Must have got caught in the fire—burned to a crisp."

"Funny thing to happen to a coyote," said Green. He reined his horse close to the fence, leaned in the saddle and peered closely at the dead animal. "They're mighty smart to get caught in a fire. And what was a coyote doing in a wheat field, I wonder?"

"Might have been huntin' for mice," suggested Higgins.

GREEN continued to stare at the seared body. Suddenly he swung down from his saddle and climbed the fence. He squatted beside the coyote, eyeing it closely. He reached out and raised the animal's tail. Almost all the flesh was burned off. The bone was exposed and around it was twisted a strand of wire that dangled from a fire-warped joint.

"What in blazes?" wondered Higgins.

Jacob Green leaned over the crisped tail and sniffed it. Then he leaned back on his heels and gave a low whistle.

"So that's how they did it," he murmured. "Well, of all the devilish things. But not without a precedent."

"Feller, just what are you talkin' about?" demanded the bewildered farmer.

Jacob Green countered with a question of his own. "Ever read the Scriptures?" he asked.

"Sartain," replied Higgins, "from kiver to kiver, as the saying goes."

"Well," said Green, "here's a passage maybe you'll remember. I believe I can quote it just about as it goes—

"'And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took firebrands, and turned them tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails. And when he had set the brands on fire, he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines, and burnt up both the shocks, and also the standing corn, with the vineyards and olives.'"

"Fifteenth chapter of the Book of Judges!" Higgins instantly exclaimed. "Well, if this don't take the shingles off the barn!"

"Only the hellions who pulled this did Samson one better," said Green. "I've always sort of doubted it could be done the way Samson was said to have done it. *They* wrapped the tails with oil-soaked rags or waste and shoved the poor devils into the wheat. Of course they ran like crazy and the fire went across the field in streaks like you fellers saw."

"Well, I'll be—" Jethro Higgins began, and suddenly remembered he was a church member. "To think Eldon Parr had savvy enough to do such a thing. I'd never have believed it."

"He didn't have, and never would have," Green replied. "Parr had nothing to do with it."

"What!" exclaimed Higgins. "What makes you say that?"

"Eldon Parr," Green explained, "is just about illiterate. Can't do much more than write his name and spell out words, I'd say. Chances are he never read the Book of Judges, or any other book, for that matter. No, it was a heap smarter and better educated man than Eldon Parr who figured this one out."

"Sounds reasonable," admitted Higgins, "but what do you say about this? It's the second one I got during' the past week."

He fumbled a slip of paper from his pocket and passed it to his companion.

Jacob Green took the paper and read.

This is the last warning, Higgins. I'm telling you for the last time to vacate. If you disregard this, we are coming to run you out. You'd better get going, pronto.

The note was written in ink, in a neat, legible hand. Under it was scrawled in pencil:

Eldon Parr.

Jacob Green gazed at the paper with narrowing eyes. Suddenly he turned it over and rubbed the back with his sensitive fingertips. He raised his gaze to Jethro Higgins' face.

"Eldon Parr never wrote this note," he said flatly. "Look at the body of the note and then the signature. A blind man can see they're not by the same hand."

Maybe not," Higgins admitted, "but he signed it, and that's what counts."

"Nope," disagreed Green. "He never signed it. What he signed was something else. Perhaps an order for a list of supplies, or a note to somebody or other. What he signed was written very lightly in pencil. Then the pencilling was erased and this note written in ink. On the reverse side of the paper you can feel the pencil marks, and if you look real close you can see where the erasures were very carefully made."

"Want to know!" exclaimed the astounded farmer. "By jingo, you're right! Who in blazes did write it?"

"I think I know," Jacob Green returned, "but it still doesn't mean over much, even if I do know. The man who wrote this is a smart jigger, and so far there's practically nothing against him. This is going to take some thinking out."

WORDLESS, Jethro Higgins shook his grizzled head. He glanced at the westering sun.

"About time to knock off work," he said. "Brother Green, suppose you come along with me and eat supper and spend the night. Be plumb glad to have you."

"Sounds good," Green agreed.

"Let's go," said Higgins. "Just a little ways farther on and right up the canyon is my place."

Green mounted his horse and they forged ahead, passing webs of irrigation ditches in which the shining water gurgled. They rounded a corner of the wire and entered the canyon mouth. A few hundred yards farther and they came to Higgins' place, an old ranch-house built amid cottonwoods. It sat fairly in the shadow of the tall dam that spanned the narrow canyon from wall to wall. The dam was more than fifty feet in height, solidly constructed of rough masonry. Water poured through the sluice gates and even trickled over the crest. Green judged that the impounded lake must be of considerable size.

"If that dam should happen to bust, your house would be in a bad spot," he remarked to Higgins.

"That's right," the old farmer agreed with a chuckle. "There wouldn't be anything left but bare ground. But it won't bust. She's built plumb solid. I wouldn't have built the house here, though. Found it when I come. An old feller who run some cows in this canyon built it years and years back. It's comfortable enough for an old feller like me who lives alone and a lot bigger than I really need, now that my two boys are in school over east. Some day I'll build another one nearer town, if the trouble ever clears up in this section. Making plenty of money to do it after a while."

Green glanced with interest at a couple of men who were working about the barn.

"See you hire Mexicans," he commented.

"That's right," said Higgins. "The color of a man's skin or where he comes from or what he thinks don't matter with me, so long as he does his work right. Them fellers over there are plumb good workers. I got three of 'em workin' for me, but the other one didn't show up today. Reckon he's in town doin' a mite of celebratin', though he didn't say anything about it yesterday. One who works for Bije White didn't show up, either."

As they drew nearer, Green noted that the two workers were very dark with broad faces and high cheek bones. His eyes grew thoughtful, but he did not comment further.

Higgins threw together a tasty meal which the pair enjoyed in comfortable silence. After cleaning up, they sat in the spacious living room and talked.

"We're having a big meeting tomorrow night," Higgins said. "All the boys will be here at my place and we aim to decide just what to do. A good many of the boys are for having a showdown with the ranchers right off—getting it over with for good and all. I sort of leaned that way myself, but after what you showed me over by the field, I ain't so sure."

Jacob Green studied the farmer's face. He decided that Higgins was trustworthy and could keep his mouth shut. He took his deputy sheriff's badge from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"Yes, I'm a law officer," he told the surprised farmer. "Sheriff Lawlor is doing everything he can to clean up this mess, and I don't want you fellers to do anything that will make it harder for him. Taking the law into your own hands is bad and will mean trouble for everybody. Try and keep your men in line a little while longer, Higgins. I've got a notion we may get a break soon."

"I'll try," the farmer promised. "I'll do everything I can, and the boys usually listen to me. But something has got to be done soon. Our crops are our living and if we can't harvest 'em we'll lose our land. Another season like this and we're done for."

Green regaled Higgins with an account of the widespread cattle poisoning. Old Jethro was positive that none of the farmers was responsible for it.

The following morning, Higgins announced his intention of riding to Terlingua to arrange for the purchase and shipment of some needed supplies.

"I've talked the boys into staying away from Aguila for a spell," he told Green. "No sense in going hunting for trouble, and that's the cattlemen's hangout."

"Believe I'll ride with you, if you don't mind," Green said. "I can head back to Aguila from there."

V

SOON after breakfast they set out.

"We hit the north trail just west of Aguila. Knocks off miles of riding."

Higgins led the way up the canyon to the dam. Near where the masonry joined the canyon wall, a zigzag track wound up the steep slope. It was a hard scramble for the horses, but they made it to the top, which was level with the crest of the dam. The faint trail they reached bored straight through the hills instead of circling around their flanks as did the road by which Green had reached the canyon.

"Good to know if a feller happened to be in a hurry," Green observed, little thinking how thankful he would soon be for the knowledge.

In Terlingua, while Higgins arranged for his purchases, Jacob Green visited the offices of the wholesale drug firm. He showed his badge and had an interesting and informative talk with the manager.

He was silent and preoccupied during the homeward ride. At the trail forks, he declined an invitation to attend the meeting that night in the canyon and rode on to Aguila. He stabled his horse and at once repaired to the local drugstore.

There was no twinkle in his brown eyes when he faced the fat proprietor across the counter. They were hard as bits of obsidian.

"So," he said softly, "you don't *sell* arsenic, but you *buy* it, in fifty pound lots."

The druggist's face turned the color of a bad egg broken in milk. His mouth dropped open.

"Wh-wh-what!" he gasped.

"Don't you know poisoning cows is a hanging offense in this country?" Jacob Green said. "That fat neck of yours will sure stretch a heap with all your weight dragging down on it."

"I didn't have nothing to do with it,"

screeched the druggist. "I didn't poison no cows! I just sold him the stuff."

"Sold it to whom?" Jacob Green demanded.

"I—I ain't telling," the man quavered, sweat streaming down his cheeks. "He'll kill me if I tell."

"Okay," Jacob Green said. "I'll go out and spread the story around. Reckon some of the boys will be visiting you soon. Don't try to hold your breath when the rope gets tight. The quicker it's over the easier it'll be."

He headed for the door, but the druggist dashed around the counter and gripped his arm with frenzied strength.

"Wait—wait!" he gasped. "I'll talk. I'll tell you. I had to go along with him. I got into trouble once and he knowed about it. He held it over me."

"Trouble over El Paso way, eh?" Jacob Green tried a shrewd shot in the dark.

"That's right," panted the other. "He knowed about it, and so did Ham Johnson."

"That's why you killed Ham, eh?"

"I didn't kill him!" squealed the frantic man. "Fisher killed him 'cause he was trying to pull out."

"And then drygulched his own hands when they came looking for Ham's body, figuring the farmers would get the blame."

"That's right, too. Him and the Mexicans poisoned the waterholes and set the fires. Reckon you know it already. Now he'll kill me, sure."

Jacob Green shook the other's grip from his arm. "So long as you keep your mouth shut, I'll keep this to myself, while he's loose to get at you," he promised. "Now forget all about me being here tonight."

"I'll forget—I forgot already," gulped the druggist. Green believed him.

Green had something to eat and then went to his room to think and try and figure out his next move. He was sitting by the window smoking when a knock sounded on the door. He opened it to admit Manuel, the Boxed E cook. The old Mexican was breathing hard and his eyes were wild.

"Capitan," he gasped, "evil is to be done this night. The Senor Fisher and others plan to destroy the water dam of the farmers, with dynamite. Even now they ride to Horse Creek Canyon. I listened to their talk in the office. The *patron* and his men are here in town."

Jacob Green stared at the Mexican. Then the full significance of the statement burst upon him. The farmers gathered at Jethro Higgins' house, in the very shadow of the dam! They would be drowned like prairie dogs in a flooded burrow. Fisher had been informed of the meeting by the breeds he had planted on the farmlands. He aimed to destroy all the farmers at one fell swoop!

For a moment Green's thoughts raced wildly. Then he uttered an exultant exclamation. The short cut Jethro Higgins showed him! Perhaps he could reach the canyon before Fisher and his breeds had time to blow the dam. He thrust his deputy sheriff's badge into Manuel's hand.

"Find the *patron*," he told the Mexican. "Show him this and tell him just what you told me. Tell him I said to get his men together and ride for the canyon as fast as he can get there. Hightail, Manuel!"

TOGETHER they dashed down the stairs. Manuel darted off one way, Green another. In the livery stable, Green got the rig on his horse with frantic haste. Then he sent the great bay thundering out of town at racing speed.

Although the trail through the hills was much shorter than that which followed the prairie, to Jacob Green it seemed long indeed. He did not know just when Fisher and his breeds had left the Boxed E ranchhouse, but doubtless they had departed before Manuel. The Mexican would hardly have dared risked leaving first. Which meant that even now they might be busy setting their death trap.

"God of my fathers, aid me!" Jacob Green muttered, and urged the flying bay to greater speed.

Finally, with the plainsman's uncanny sense of distance and direction,

Jacob Green knew he was nearing the canyon. He was forced to slacken the bay's pace, lest the drumming of his hoofs on the rocky trail be heard. A little later he dismounted and ran forward on foot. On the lip of the canyon, above where the swollen lake tossed and muttered and the water roared through the open sluice gates and spilled over the dam's crest in places, he paused, straining his eyes for movement on the shadowy wall. Then he crept swiftly down the zig-zag track till he was able to set foot on the dam's crest.

"They're almost sure to plant the stuff on the crest," he reasoned. "They'll blow off the crest, shatter the upper masonry, and the water will do the rest. Blowing at the bottom would take too much dynamite, and too much time to plant it."

The moon was hidden behind a cloud and the darkness was intense. Jacob Green groped forward a few steps along the dizzy crest. Suddenly he saw, near the center of the structure, a winking of fire. And at that instant the clouds thinned and a shaft of moonlight poured down, making the scene as bright as day.

There was a startled yelp. Three men crouching over the sputter of fire sprang erect. Lances of reddish flame darted through the silvery moonlight.

Jacob Green heard the screech of slugs past his face, felt their lethal breath. Then his own guns were out and blazing death toward the dark forms that ran toward him, shooting as they came.

Through the swirls of powder smoke, he saw one man slump forward to lie motionless in a huddled heap. A bullet burned a hot streak along his ribs. His Colts bucked in his hands and a second man, less than a dozen yards distant, whirled sideways and pitched from the lofty crest. Then the third man was upon him as his gun hammers clicked on empty shells.

Green had a glimpse of Bert Fisher's rage distorted face and his glaring eyes. He lashed a blow with his gun barrel, but Fisher dodged the flailing steel and fired point blank as Jacob Green hurled himself sideways along the crest. He felt the burn of the powder flame. Light blazed before his eyes as the slug creased his temple.

He knew he was no match for the powerfully built Fisher should the other close with him. He hurled his empty guns into Fisher's face and dived straight toward his lithe antagonist. Green's shoulder struck his legs and Fisher flew over his body as if he had taken wings. With one awful scream of rage and terror, he cleared the lip of the crest and shot downward to the rocks fifty feet below.

Jacob Green lay on the damp masonry breathing in great gasps, his head whirling and pounding, his legs hanging over the black depths that had swallowed Fisher.

It was the downward pull of his legs and the slow slipping of his body across the slanting stone that roused Green to full consciousness. With a frantic wriggle he scrambled back to safety and rose to his feet, weaving giddily. He glared wildly about. A sputter of golden sparks was crawling slowly along the surface of the stone.

Lurching and reeling, Green reached the burning fuse. He fumbled in his pocket for a knife, but it had been lost in the struggle. He dropped to his knees and gripped the fuse at the very tip of the detonating cap. He dared not try to pull the cap free. To do so would undoubtedly set off the charge.

Frantically he gnawed at the tough fiber, his gums raw and bleeding. And ever the sputtering flower of fire crept nearer.

With sparks stinging his mouth he felt the fuse parting. He took a desperate chance and gave a mighty wrench. The fiber yielded. He hurled the smoking length into the water below and fell prone on the stone again.

SHOUTS heard faintly above the roar of the water roused him from his stupor. Raising his head, he saw lights bobbing up the canyon. He got painfully to his feet, reeled along the crest

and stumbled down the zig-zag trail to the canyon floor.

Old Jethro Higgins ran forward, holding up a lantern. "Brother Green, you're hurt!" he cried anxiously.

"Just scratches," Jacob Green replied with a wan smile. "A cup of coffee and I'll be all right."

With a brawny farmer supporting him on either side, he made it to the house, where Higgins forced him into a chair and examined and bathed his wounds, which were slight. Under the stimulus of the coffee, his strength quickly returned. He smiled at the ring of anxious faces, the old twinkle back in his brown eyes.

Outside sounded loud shouts and a pounding of hoofs.

"It's Eldon Parr and his hands," said Green. "They're coming to help. Let 'em in."

The Boxed E bunch streamed into the room, Eldon Parr in the lead.

"So you got here in time, Green!" he whooped exultantly.

"Just," Jacob Green replied.

"Where's Fisher?" Parr asked.

"Down 'below,' I reckon, if he got what's coming to him," Jacob Green replied, "along with the breeds he brought over here from the El Paso country to help him and Ham Johnson with their snake-blooded work."

"How in blazes did you catch onto the sidewinder?" Parr wanted to know.

"Might never have, if he hadn't set a couple of his breeds to kill me the night I hit town," Jacob Green replied. "Fisher spotted me right off for something other than a prospector. From my boots, I've a notion. He figured I should be gotten out of the way pronto. I downed one of his drygulchers and when I looked him over I found his pocket linings were caked with the kind of salt dust you find over on the El Paso flats. It seeps into every crevice of a man's clothes, and stays there. I already knew that Fisher and Johnson were from the El Paso country and that started me to thinking about them. Then things sort of tied up. Higgins will tell you the rest. Now I reckon you fellers had better shake hands all around and decide to pull together. You haven't gotten very far bucking each other. I want to see peace and quiet in this section from now on. Haven't time to be riding up here settling ruckuses. I've got a chore of storekeeper to look after."

"I liked Bert Fisher, but I'm darn glad he got what was comin' to him, the slick-ironin' hellion," Eldon Parker remarked a little later.

Jacob Green chuckled. "Reckon there's one feller in the section who'll be even gladder," he remarked.

"Who's that?" asked Parr.

"A feller over in Aguila," Green replied as he visualized the fat druggist's scared face, "A feller who's worrying about catching a bad case of sore throat."

You've Never Read a Yarn Like—

FEAR BRANDED by WALT COBURN

Coming up in the Next Issue!

Bronc Blood

Little Bill was trying to pick up the snake

by
LESLIE ERNENWEIN

IT was a bad thing to see. Nobody likes to watch a man get his heart cut out with a dull knife, which is about what happened to Frank Benton that afternoon in front of the Rafter B bunkhouse.

I'd been there upwards of three years and knew the Benton brothers inside out. Frank was the best-natured galoot you ever saw—had a heart like a steel-dust horse, never worried come hell or high water. Happy-go-lucky cuss. Bill,

Things Look Black for Frank Benton of the Rafter B!

a year younger, was just the opposite —sober as a judge and so ambitious he sat up nights figuring how to increase the calf crop. To his way of thinking Frank was a fiddle-footed fool always traipsing off to help some shiftless nester break a bad bronc colt, or to bail a Mex friend out of the calaboose. But most of all he disliked Frank's occasional sprees.

Like now, when he found Frank sitting in the bunkhouse doorway with Little Bill on his knee.

"I don't cotton to have my boy associate with drunks," Bill said, picking up his two-year-old son. "Gloria says if you ain't in condition to work you ain't in condition to play with innocent kids."

FRANK thought the world of Little Bill. And the kid felt the same way about Frank, who was always bringing him candy and toys from town. Frank got up and rubbed a hand across his whisker-bristled jaw and stared at Bill like he wasn't sure it was him.

"You mean—I ain't to—fool around with Little Bill?" he asked.

"That's what I mean," Bill said. He nodded toward me and added: "You've got company enough—the kind you need after a two-day drunk."

I felt like reminding him that Frank didn't go on sprees more'n a couple times a year—just when some friend got married, or had a baby, or died. But I stood there and watched Frank take it with that friendly grin on his face. Little Bill waved to him as his father toted him off toward the house. "Adios, little pard," Frank called.

"A heck of a way for a man to treat his own brother," I remarked.

Frank shrugged. "Maybe Bill and Gloria are right," he said. "You have to be careful with little boys. They pick up bad habits real young sometimes."

Then he went inside and spraddled out on a bunk.

Sitting there, favoring my bad leg that never healed right since I rode for Burt Mossman's Arizona Rangers, I thought about the day Frank brought me to Rafter B.

"Joe is an old friend," he told Bill. "He'll make us a good handy man."

Bill had looked me over like I was a spavined, worked-out horse he didn't want.

"Most of your friends are lazy trash," he said, naming them off like a merchant tallying up a bill of goods. "Sid Pelky, who'd rather spend a week hunting for a deer than do a day's work on his sorry homestead, and Mucho Morales who takes all morning to shoe a horse."

He named upwards of a dozen, while Frank just stood there with a sort of sheepish grin on his face. Then Bill looked at me again and said:

"We're not paying a chore boy anything above his keep."

"I'll take care of that myself," Frank told him, and that's how an old beat-up relic named Joe Morgan missed going to the Pioneer's Home.

A lot of other things came back to me, sitting there that August afternoon —things that made me sore as a bull with a busted horn. Like that fancy-faced Gloria, who'd been courted by both the Benton boys for upwards of three years before she finally chose Bill for a husband. According to town gossip she'd been sweet on Frank too, but her daddy, who owned the Mercantile, favored Bill because he was so ambitious.

"Frank," the merchant had warned, "is just a kind-hearted fool who'll give away his share of the ranch by the time he's fifty."

So Gloria married Bill and they went off to Tucson on a honeymoon. Frank took care of the ranch while they was gone. But the day they got back he went to town and got drunker'n an Apache. Bill and his new bride was sitting on the front gallery when Mucho Morales, the big Mex blacksmith, brought Frank home. Bill took one look at his brother.

"Dump him in the bunkhouse with the rest of the trash," he said.

Frank has slept there ever since. Only time he goes to the house is to eat, same as me and the two Mex cowboys that work here. But nobody ever heard him

say a word against Bill, nor against Bill's high-toned wife. Come to think of it I've never heard him speak critical of anybody.

After a while Frank came out and said, "I promised to help Sid Pelky dehorn that half-breed Brahma cow that hooked his horse."

He glanced at Little Bill who was playing over by the woodpile and I saw an expression come into his face that startled me. Horror, mostly, and a kind of God-awful fear. In that split-second, before he started running toward Little Bill, his cheeks turned chalky.

"What's wrong?" I gasped.

But Frank didn't answer me. He ran toward Little Bill, ran as if his life depended on it.

And then I saw what was wrong; Little Bill had spooked a big diamondback rattler out of the woodpile. Ordinarily those snakes will hightail off unless they're cornered. But this was August—skin-shedding time when rattlesnakes go blind and loco as a rabid coyote. I mean they're rank, striking at everything that moves!

"Little Bill!" Frank yelled. "Little Bill!"

But the kid paid him no heed, nor his mother who came out on the kitchen stoop and let out a shriek you could of heard in town. Little Bill was trying to pick up the snake and it was striking at him blind. I couldn't say a word or move a step. I just stood there gawking and hearing Little Bill laugh when that rattler's fangs missed the kid's face by a hairbreadth. By grab it was purely awful!

THEN I saw Frank make a dive for Little Bill, throwing hisself between the kid and the snake. He grabbed Little Bill and held the kid away as the snake struck, again and again. . . .

I'd got moving by now. I grabbed a big mesquite limb off the woodpile and busted that snake a lick just as it struck Frank's arm. And then, as I tromped it down and smashed the big, flat-jawed head, Gloria grabbed Little Bill up in her arms.

Frank was pale as a ghost when I went over to him. He was panting from the run—lying there winded, and trying to tell Gloria and Bill that the kid hadn't been bit.

"The little tyke is all right—ain't hurt at all," he said, seeing how worried they was over Little Bill.

"But you got bit in the arm!" I said and took out my knife.

Frank rolled up his sleeve so I could see the fang marks where the flesh was already turning purplish.

"Better work fast," he said. "Got another in the right leg."

It's an odd thing. I've used a knife plenty times on calves and colts, but I sure hated to use it on Frank. However it had to be done, so I clenched my jaws and slashed his flesh, criss-cross and deep enough so's it would bleed free. Then I handed my knife to Bill.

"Git at that one on his leg," I said, and began sucking the wound.

Bill slit Frank's pantleg. He said, "I hate to do this to you, Frank."

"That's all right," Frank told him. "Go ahead and cut."

But Bill couldn't seem to do it, until Gloria exclaimed, "You've got to, Bill—you've just got to. Otherwise he'll die!"

I heard Frank grunt when Bill cut him, but I didn't think nothing of it then. I just kept sucking blood, and spitting, and hoping I was getting all the venom out.

Little Bill was crying now. He'd seen us cut on Frank and didn't like it at all. Thought we was misusing his uncle.

"You hurted Uncle Frank!" he wailed. "You hurted him!"

And then Gloria said in a scared voice: "You cut him too deep, Bill."

Deeper the better, I thought. That rattler'd had the biggest head I ever saw on a snake, which meant big sacs of venom. The more Frank bled the less chance there'd be of poison getting to his heart. A man dies a horrible death with that stuff in him.

Then Gloria cried: "You've cut an artery, Bill—he's bleeding to death!"

And so he was.

I'll never forget that run to town with Bill whipping the team and me trying to keep Frank from passing out. We'd fixed a tourniquet around his leg, but didn't dast keep it tight for more than a few minutes at a time. Gloria and Little Bill were on the seat with Big Bill and the kid kept squirming to get back with Frank.

"He's hurted," Little Bill howled. "My Uncle Frank is hurted!"

"I'm all right, pard," Frank told him.

But his grin looked sickish and his lips was turning blue. Between the blood I'd sucked out of him, and what he'd lost from that severed artery he was sapped weak as a gutted steer.

It was sixteen miles to town, over a rough road.

There was a lot of thinking going on in that wagon. Especially after Frank closed his eyes and lay there spraddled out like a dead man. I kept remembering how Bill had said he didn't want his son associating with drunks. And how Frank had said mebbe Bill was right, being as how kids picked up bad habits. Well, Little Bill had tried to pick up something worse today; he would of picked up sure death, except for Frank. A kid that age wouldn't of stood no chance at all bit by a big rattler. He'd of died for certain.

I guess Bill and Gloria was thinking about that when we toted Frank into the hospital.

Bill said to Doc Levitt, "How about using my blood for a transfusion?"

"Of course, if it's the right type," Doc said, and when I made the same offer, the medico turned us over to a nurse. "We'll need a lot of blood—all we can get."

Bill's wasn't the right type. He argued with the nurse, saying he was Frank's brother and so the blood should be the same. But she said no. That worried me, because even if mine was right there wouldn't be enough. I'd left blood all over Arizona Territory while riding for Burt Mossman. Now I was just a dried-up old scarecrow that had to stand twice in the same place to cast a shadow.

My blood was right, what there was of it. They put me on a cot alongside Frank and started the transfusion.

"Is he going to make it?" I asked.

Doc Levitt shook his head. "I doubt if he had enough blood in him to counteract the poison that got into his system. There's bound to be some venom you didn't get. Perhaps if we had enough blood there might be a chance."

Gloria was there. "I'll give some," she offered. "All you want. Please take mine!"

But hers wasn't right either. That reminded me of something Frank had said once: "The difference between Bill and me is that I've got bronc blood in me, and he hasn't."

GLORIA didn't have no bronc blood in her either. But I did. And now, as I got off the cot, it occurred to me that there was some others that might have the same low-grade stuff in their veins.

"I'll get you some more blood," I promised.

"Who from?" Bill asked.

"From all them no-account friends of Frank's," I told him. "They got bronc blood in 'em, same as me!"

It didn't take long to find 'em. Nor no pleading. Sid Pelky, who'd been waiting to meet Frank in town, had seen us drive in. He was in the waiting room when I came out.

"Frank needs another blood transfusion," I told him.

Sid never said nothing. He went in there like a spooked jackrabbit.

Mucho Morales was next. *"Bueno!"* he exclaimed and was rolling up his sleeve as he ran toward the hospital.

That's the way it went right down the line. Pokey Pete Slagg, the saloon swamper who'd once been a Ranger; Red Gorman who'd done a stretch in Yuma Prison for holding up the Benson stage way back when he was a fiddle-footed young rooster; Navaho Joe Yokum, the squawman; and Jim Kimball, a Poverty Flats nester who seemed to raise more kids than he did cattle. A whole passel of 'em that I run out of the poolroom, liverystable, and them

frijole joints along Sonora Alley.

They lined up at the hospital like volunteers joining Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, and they looked like a rogues' gallery for sure. But every one of 'em was willing to give his last drop of blood to Frank Benton who'd been their friend. The only real friend some of 'em had. Like me.

And, by grab, they all had the right type of blood. Bronc blood. . . .

That evening and into the night they kept the transfusions going. When a man got off the cot there was another to take his place, and them that had done their bit stayed in the waiting room to see if more was needed. They all had the same question in their eyes: Was Frank going to make it?

Gloria had left Little Bill with her folks in town. She and Bill waited like the rest of us, and I got to feeling a trifle sorry for them when Frank said:

"I'm the one who cut his artery—yet I can't do a thing to help him."

And Gloria, looking downright meek and somehow prettier than I'd ever saw her, said, "We'll make it up to him."

"If he lives," Bill muttered, almost blubbering right there in front of us.

At midnight it was all over. Doc Levitt came out and said we might as well go get some sleep.

"Won't know for a while yet whether Frank will react favorably or not," he told us. "All we can do now is hope."

"And pray," Gloria said.

Nobody left. We just stayed there waiting and hoping. At one o'clock the nurse came out to tell us that Frank's pulse was stronger. "But it's not necessarily a good sign," she warned. "He's going through a crisis—the new blood fighting the poison that's reached his heart."

"He'll win out," Sid Pelky said. "The Lord wouldn't let such a nice feller as Frank die."

But he didn't seem too sure.

And Mucho Morales muttered: "Per-'aps I should brought my wife Juanita for the transfixion. She ees beeg womans and has much reech blood."

Then I noticed that Gloria wasn't sitting on the bench with Bill. She was on her knees in front of it, praying out loud.

"Dear God, don't let him die. And please forgive us for mistreating him so."

It was a thing to see. A thing to remember. The way she got up and smiled at Bill and said softly:

"I think Frank will live."

Soon after that Doc Levitt came out and he was smiling also.

He said, "Frank is over the hill, and sleeping peacefully as a well-fed pup. There's no more danger."

"Thank God!" Bill Benton exclaimed, and whispered something to Gloria before he hurried outside.

But it was Gloria that really showed her appreciation. She came over and kissed me on the cheek.

"Thank you, Joe," she said. "Thank you so much." Then she did the same with Mucho Morales, Sid Pelky and all the others.

You never saw nothing like it in your life. Gloria Benton, who'd been so high-toned she'd scarcely look at what she called the common trash, kissed every man-jack who'd donated his blood to Frank.

When that was finished, and we was all smiling like thieves dividing swag, Gloria announced:

"Bill has gone to order up a big banquet at the hotel—so we can all celebrate together!"

* * * * *

And that's how come Little Bill ain't the only one that calls Frank Benton "Uncle Frank." All them Morales, Pelky, Yokum and Kimball kids figger they're Frank's kinfolk too because he brags about having the same blood in his veins. Bronc blood. . . .

Three Top-Flight Action Novels in Every Issue of Our Companion Magazine TRIPLE WESTERN—Now on Sale, 25c at All Stands!

E'TOWN'S GOLDEN DAZE

By VEDA NEVILLE CONNER

Looking for a fortune?
There's gold in those New Mexico hills!

POUR an abundance of "cheap" water into the Elizabethtown district of northwestern New Mexico today and large gold mining operations would be the order of tomorrow. Tremendous amounts of placer gold, rich pockets in the gravel, exist there. Even without that water any man can net a few dollars for a day's work, hand-method.

But what is that to six million dollars in gold in a few short years?

The discovery that led to those millions is different from the usual bonanza tale.

It all began with copper. Up near New Mexico's Colorado border in Taos County one autumn day in 1866 two men were hanging around Mora's trading post. They watched with keen interest a group of "Spanish" Ute Indians laying out rich copper ore to trade. The pair decided they might do a little speculating, but in a modern, scientific, 1866 manner. So W. H. Kroenig and the-same-initials Moore hired a mining man

who knew his business to get the Indians to lead him to the source of the copper.

From Copper to Gold

Up on the summit of 12,000 foot Baldy Peak the W. H.'s located their soon-to-be-famous Mystic Mine. Busy on more important affairs, they sent up three men to attend to the year's assessment work, necessary to hold their claim.

Kinsinger, Bronson and Kelley obediently made camp on Baldy. They got busy on the assessment work. But isolated men in camp need recreation too, and Kelley took the traditional prospector's busman's holiday. He went panning in Willow Creek. He certainly didn't expect to see the shining gold drops that glistened almost at once from the fine sand in the bottom of the dark old pan.

His wild yells, "Pete! Larry!" brought Kinsinger and Bronson on the run, primed for no less than mountain cat or bear. In a matter of seconds all three were frantically washing dollar pans out of the creek bed.

But placer mining isn't done on Baldy Peak in winter. The three men reluctantly agreed the strike must wait till spring for development. Swearing each other to deepest secrecy, they marked an immense, towering pine. They named it "Discovery Tree," their key to boundless prosperity.

Winter passed draggingly at Fort Union. But at last the three rich-poor men could set off for Baldy Peak. Their eyes popped when they trudged into Willow Gulch. Every hill, ravine and cranny buzzed to high heaven with prospectors, building sluice boxes, breaking rocks, leaping from crag to crag like mountain goats. The three old-timers had forgotten that gold smells on your breath—even when you don't breathe.

The partners headed for Discovery Tree and succeeded in making the first location.

Then, all up and down the rugged slopes of Baldy, in nearby hills, on cliffs, all along the Moreno River, all over the area, one gold discovery followed another. Not an inch of Humbug and Grouse Gulches remained unclaimed. In Michigan Gulch, at the upper end of the Moreno Valley, a group made a discovery and named themselves the Michigan Company—a man known only as Big Mich, big in frame, big in ideas—and Fred Pheffer, Pat Lyons, J. E. Codlim.

The Big Ditch

Another of the daily gold rushes tore out to the Spanish Bar on the banks of the Moreno where Kinsinger, still staking them out, located with Thomas Lowthian and a man named Bergmann. Matthew Lynch and Tim Foley discovered the famous Aztec Lode on Baldy's east face.

Fat nuggets, rich new pockets, dollar pan cleanups were the exhilarating, hilarious order of a day not soon to be forgotten even in places far from the Moreno Valley. The peak would not be passed for three years.

Although it shifted as the cry "Gold!" rang from here and there in gully, gulch and hill, a real population of thousands existed, living in tents, shacks and log huts. One day, a John Moore woke to the fact that here was a town. He promptly named it Elizabethtown for his oldest and favorite daughter.

The next year there were streets to be surveyed. Another year saw Elizabethtown, now E'town, the county seat of newly created Colfax County, formerly a part of Taos County. Mechanization, water and big outside interests had been brought to create a "city," a real mining city that used hydraulics and stamp mills.

And in another year, in 1870, E'town was incorporated by act of the territorial legislature. Eastern investors were vitally interested in this area.

This is no tale of discoverers of a gold strike selling their millions' worth for a few thousands, blowing in the result, then begging a grubstake from the lush beneficiaries. Kroenig and Moore of the first Baldy mine—the Mystic—were not only in on the ground floor, but stayed there. They were among those substantial, clear-headed

men who vigorously pushed every project for the possible good of the Moreno Valley Fields. Who helped make them worthy of the attention they got from the outside world. Who not only participated in the millions in gold taken in those first few years from the district, but in 1869 were among those who promoted the Big Ditch.

Big Mich and his company, Kinsinger and the Spanish Bar miners, among others, had dug ditches to bring water from Moreno River and Comanche Creek to work their claims. But far too much gold-laden dirt was going "unwashed." Kroenig and Moore and four others organized the Moreno Water and Mining Company. They planned a big, 600 inch capacity ditch. There would be three huge reservoirs and miles of feeder ditches.

They learned they would need forty-two miles of ditch to begin with. The water was eleven miles away, crow flight, but there were all those pine and pinon-covered hills to wind around. It would cost $300,000.

Still, the miners had their hands in their pockets, eager to shell out fifty cents an inch, $6 a foot for first water. What were they waiting for?

Boom Town

The big job went through. But the M. W. & M. Co. forgot two things. When the water rushed down the forty-two miles to the gold fields, evaporation took over above, seepage below. Up into the golden sunshine, down into the sandy, thirsty earth went a large part of fifty cents an inch water. The Big Ditch never reached anything like its dreamed-of 600 inch capacity. The Moreno Water and Mining Company evaporated like the water.

Several hopefuls tackled the Big Ditch, but failed, one after another. Till the Aztec Lode's Matthew Lynch took it over in 1875 and somehow made a go of it for five years.

E'town grew from hand-worked placers scratching the earth for gold through an era of immense mills and machines designed for immense operations, with outside capital flowing in, with growth in every direction. There was no stopping the town that was built on a gold foundation. Workmen came from everywhere and this called for more and more boardinghouses, hotels, camps—usually on mining property—stores, services. New enterprises were constantly opening up and thriving. The Eleanor, a huge dredging boat, was floated by the Oro Dredging Company below E'town.

This promotion and development continued through the turn of the century. It included even the proposal, at least, of a railroad. It was to come to E'town from Cimarron and—who knows?—maybe even go on to Taos.

Through ensuing years the Great Commotion died down. Production fell off and E'town saw coming the inevitable fate of gold boom towns. But then there came a new lease on life. Scientific methods were to be inaugurated in the placer workings. They would be operated again—and profitably. Once again men would bring sacks of golden powder—prosperity—into Elizabethtown. But the excitement the town felt this time was a different brand. Under what was almost a calm pleasure were memories of men whooping it up, mixing gold dust with whisky, giving nuggets to the kids like candy. The sudden, blood-tingling cry of "Gold!"

Today? Today Elizabethtown needs water. Lots of water, and at a price she can afford to pay. Then E'town will buzz again. There's still plenty of gold in them thar Elizabethtown hills.

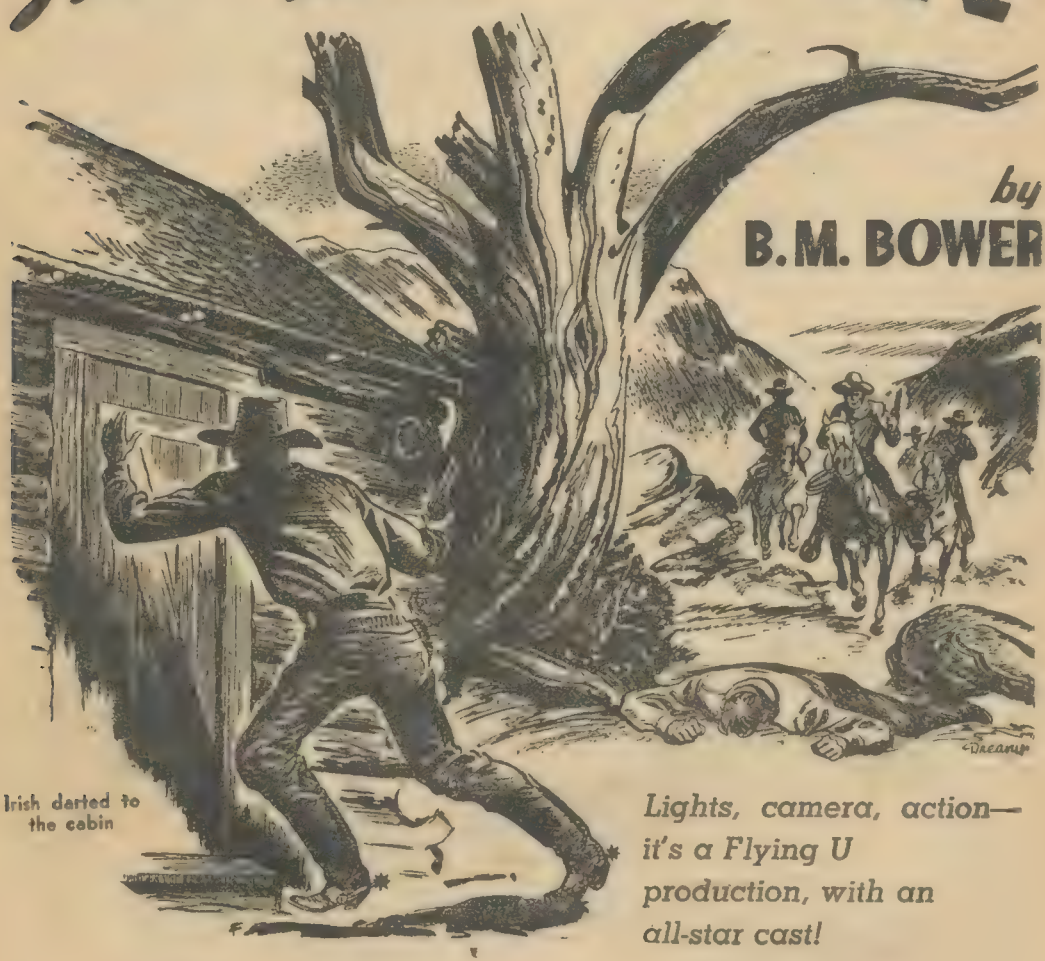
BEST PIONEER STORIES OF THE OLD WEST IN—

THE RIO KID WESTERN

NOW ON SALE — 20c PER COPY AT ALL STANDS!

The REEL STUFF

by
B. M. BOWER



Irish darted to the cabin

Lights, camera, action—it's a Flying U production, with an all-star cast!

ONE of the Flying U's problems, in addition to r u s t l e r s, blizzards, drought and floods, was "Mixer" Jones. Mixer was a man who tried to be helpful. Like the time he wandered into "Rusty" Brown's place in Great Falls and observed his friend and comrade in arms, "Irish" Mallory, deep in a poker game.

Mixer was horrified. He disapproved of gambling. He was of a serious nature and the idea of losing the wages of six months' back-breaking labor on one turn of the cards appalled him.

Irish Mallory, on the other hand was independent. If he liked expensive diversions, he felt it was his own business and nobody else's. Furthermore he had just filled a flush and there was a big pot on the table and he was moving in

for the kill. He shrugged off Mixer's prodding forefinger.

"Go 'way, boy, you bother me," he said absently.

"Irish, Irish!" Mixer insisted. "You promised me you'd quit in half an hour!"

"So I will, boy, so I will," Irish mumbled, his attention on the cards.

"But it's two hours!"

Irish was annoyed, in an absent-minded way. "So it's two hours," he said. "Beat it! I got a right to break a promise in a—in a emergency. And I got a right to go broke if I want to. Will you stop bothering me?"

But Mixer had a conscience. Irish was his responsibility. He took himself a hold on the poker player's collar and with a prodigious heave, pulled him and his chair half across the room, scattering cards and chips like snow.

Irish came to his feet like an exploding bomb. He yanked his gun and only his hurry made him miss the first shot. By then Mixer was out the door and into his saddle and halfway down the street. Swearing vengeance, Irish piled after him.

It was a close race to the Flying U ranchhouse, but Mixer had a good horse and Irish was cooling down as he rode, not being bloodthirsty by nature.

He was sore, though, and it was quite a time before he forgave Mixer, even after his guardian explained that the other player had held a full house, so that Mixer certainly would have lost.

"All the same," Irish told him, "don't you go butting into a game like that again or I'll shoot your ears off!"

"Chip" Bennett, to keep the peace, banished Mixer to a distant line camp and the atmosphere here in the Flying U bunkhouse simmered down to normal.

PRESENTLY there came a day when Irish Mallory once more strolled into Rusty Brown's place, to wash the alkali dust from his throat after a long ride to find a missing horse. He was quite a picture, this Irish Mallory, with his white Angora chaps and high-heeled boots sporting rowels as big as dollars, with gray Stetson dimpled and the brim curled just so, with his lean brown face and Irish blue eyes.

He made quite a picture to two men sitting at a table, who hastened to buy him a drink and introduce themselves. Two dudes.

"Ever hear of Hollywood?" they asked him.

"Hollywood?" Irish said vaguely. "Sounds like something to do with Christmas."

"Moving pictures," said one. "We make them. Ever see one?"

"Certainly," said Irish, hurt. "Do you think I'm from Kansas?"

"Well, we make the best pictures there are. I'm Thornton Claiborne and this is my brother Walter."

Irish shook hands all around. He was impressed. "I saw a picture once called 'The Texas Train Robbery,'" he recalled. "It was swell!"

"We made it," the Claibornes told him. "It's been shown in every town in the country and translated into English and German and French. It was terrific!"

"I want to know!" Irish breathed. "Glad to know you boys. Where do I come in on this?"

"Simple," said Thornton Claiborne. "The train robbery made such a hit that we want to make some more cowboy pictures. But they've got to be right—we believe in absolute authenticity."

Irish batted his eyes. "I'm sure relieved to hear that," he said, wondering what it was they believed in. "But elucidate a little more, partner, if you don't mind."

"We want a picture with real cowboys in it," Thornton explained. "Nothing faked, nothing wrong. The real thing. Now here's another point. We've got rivals and the competition is fierce. We've had three good ideas spoiled because our competitors got wind of it and rushed their pictures out before we could finish. Then even if we put ours out they'd say we stole the idea, so we had to scrap our picture and lose all the work we'd put into it."

"That's fierce," Irish murmured, all ready sympathy.

"So now we've got this idea for a superduper Western picture and it's a dead secret. I hope you can keep a secret?"

"Running off at the face ain't one of my vices," Irish said stiffly. "Break away and unburden your soul. I'm a dead-safe confident."

"Good," said Claiborne. "We sized you up as a man we could trust. Here's the dope: This is another holdup story, but different. It's a stagecoach job and we've got most of it in the cans, but we need a big final scene. We want a capture—the real thing. Outlaws holed up in a cabin—a real old log cabin in the wildest place we can find—and we want a sheriff's posse to ride up and surround the place. And we want one helluva fight—blank cartridges, naturally. Then we want them to drag out the outlaws and lynch them—"

"Sheriff's posses don't lynch their prisoners," Irish interrupted laconically. "Not as a regular thing, anyway."

Claiborne's artistic soul was wounded. "Who's doing this?" he glared.

"It's none of my funeral," Irish said, shrugging. "Only, you said you wanted the real thing."

"That's right," Walter Claiborne cut in. "That's what we came out here for. We want it true to life—local color, details, all the pointers you can give us."

Thornton drummed on the table. "I guess it doesn't have to be a sheriff's posse," he conceded. "We can call it a mob of cowboys."

"Sure," grunted Irish, with heavy sarcasm. "We always hang somebody on Christmas and Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July, not to mention the ordinary hangings that come in the day's work. A 'mob of cowboys' is just what you want. Trot out the men you want strung up and we'll do the job. We can't furnish the victims for you, we've plumb used up all the material."

The moving-picture men blinked at him, the heavy irony finally getting through.

"Hold on," Thornton said, "you've got us wrong, Mr. Mallory. You don't think we meant a real hanging, do you? We've got a way of fixing straps under a man's arms to hold him up, so you could never tell the difference. What we want most from you is the cabin, the setting."

IRISH considered this, much relieved. He thought the idea would appeal to the Happy Family.

"We got the very thing you want, over near the ranch," he said, building himself a smoke. "It's made of logs, with a dirt roof, and one little window in the side and it stands in the bottom of a coulee about the width of a saddle blanket. There's plenty of wild Montana scenery for the background, with rimrocks holding up the sky. That the sort of layout you want?"

The Claibornes fell on his neck with gratitude. "We're ready to start any time you say," they gushed. "Let's go! Call out all the cowboys you can get. We'll put them all on the payroll!"

"Our bunch at the Flying U will cut the mustard," Irish said. "They're as rugged a bunch of cow nurses as ever ambled across a wagon sheet to the cheers of the audience. Will you translate us into English if we do it nice?"

The Claibornes promised they would and they bought another round of drinks and went off to the general store arm in arm. Irish, who knew the calibre of every gun on the Flying U, ordered a generous supply of blank cartridges and thanked heaven that "The Old Man"—J. G. Whitmore—was safe in Chicago.

The Little Doctor wouldn't object, he knew. And as for Chip, the foreman and husband of the Little Doctor, he'd probably lend a hand himself. In fact, Irish had a deep, dark plot brewing in the back of his mind to make Chip one of the outlaws, so that they might hang him.

Altogether, he was as gleeful as a small boy on the Fourth of July, and his brain was busy with the small artistic details which would give the picture such realism as the public seldom sees.

The Claibornes and their technical staff moved out to the Flying U in half a dozen wagons. They brought no actors

with them, for as Claiborne had explained, the bulk of the picture was already shot, and they needed only these final scenes for which the real cowboys were to be used.

As Irish had expected, the Happy Family received them with joy and promptly became as interested in moving pictures as the producers. It is doubtful that any of the Flying U boys had ever participated in, or even seen, a lynching, but they assumed evil expressions and assured the Claibornes that they knew all about it.

"We'll try an' not have it end fatal for the outlaws," they said, with a leer, "but if we forget to use the harness, wouldja kindly excuse us?"

They weren't used to that harness kind of monkey business, they explained. "Out here when we go to hang a man we just string him up and write his folks that a horse fell on him. We'll try and remember that danged harness under the arms, but if we get excited and forget, we wouldn't like for there to be hard feelings. You can explain to the coroner, can't you?"

The Claibornes turned a little green and the cowboys went down to the corral, where they could laugh without giving the show away.

There was another point which came up when they got down to discussing the details of the scene.

"Three outlaws in a cabin, with plenty of ammunition, could stand off that posse forever," "Weary" Davidson remarked, and he was backed up by the others.

"Can't let 'em reach the cabin," "Pink" said firmly. "Josephine! If they get in there, you'll get no hanging in the picture!"

The Claibornes allowed themselves to be convinced. "We ought to cut down on the hangings," they insisted. "One is enough."

The prospect of three real corpses on their hands had dampened some of their earlier enthusiasm for lynching. However, there had to be three outlaws in the scene, for earlier shots in the picture showed three.

"Have two of 'em shot off their horses just as they get to the cabin," Irish suggested. "Then the third could be caught before he gets inside. We drag him over to that big dead cottonwood near the door and hang him from it."

Thornton Claiborne shuddered a little at the fiendish glee in Irish's voice and agreed weakly.

"Now, who's going to be hung?" Irish demanded.

Not one of the Flying U boys coveted the role of villain—where the villain was doomed to get it in the neck. If the outlaw had a chance they would have jumped at the role, but with the end foreshadowed, it appealed not at all.

The Claibornes talked themselves hoarse, but until Saturday morning every man on the Flying U had voted himself a member of the pursuing posse, and it looked as if there would be no outlaws to pursue.

"Let's wait until we get to Tin Cup Coulee," Chip Bennett proposed, "and then we can shake dice for it."

They agreed.

SUNDAY was the day fixed for the event and on Saturday afternoon the Happy Family, bickering among themselves, rode out to Tin Cup Coulee for rehearsal. At the mouth of the coulee, they dismounted and produced the five little ivory cubes that would settle the dispute. Poker dice it was to be. The nine men gathered solemnly around a flat-topped rock.

Andy Green flipped four sixes and stepped back. "Won't be me," he said with a grin.

Eight hat brims met over the rock and the dice clicked again.

"Coroner won't mumble over my carcass," Chip Bennett said with a grin.

Irish Mallory looked disappointed. Seven hats tilted together. The dice rolled and one man after another stepped out of the circle.

"Six little cowboys, glad they were alive,
One rolled aces and then there were five!"

chanted Pink.

Things were getting exciting. The

last three were to be the outlaws and the lowest of these the one to be hanged. A wild yell went up when Irish himself was elected. The Claibornes, hearing the yell and convinced by now that the hanging would most likely be real, went pale.

"Oh, we won't do a thing to you, by gracious yes!" howled Andy Green.

The Claibornes rushed up and surrounded Irish. "You don't have to go through with it," Thornton chattered. "We'll call it off—we'll change the picture. You're our friend and we won't let you take any risks!"

The disgruntled expression in Irish's eyes softened. He knew what it had cost the movie men to say that and he felt some compunction at the ribbing they were getting.

"Don't let it worry you," he said. "The deal's going through now, you couldn't stop it. We'll give you a picture that will put a permanent crimp in them rivals of yours. And don't worry about me. I stand ace high with this bunch of desperadoes and there won't be any accidents—or somebody'll get hurt afterward. Ain't that right, boys?"

"Seeing it's you, Irish," said Pinky gravely, "we'll take particular care and use the harness."

The sun rose on a perfect day. Curlews went circling and crying over the grass and the prairie dogs chipped and flirted their tails impertinently as the Flying U cavalcade rode leisurely out of the ranch yard.

The Claibornes had gone ahead with their crews and equipment, to place their cameras and make ready. They squatted on a hillside opposite the cabin and waited.

Beneath them, huddled against the rocks, stood the most forlorn little cabin for many a mile, with sagging roof proclaiming it deserted. Its one tiny window showed black in the bright sunlight; its door was closed and locked with a padlock. Beside the cabin, a huge dead cottonwood stretched blackened limbs to the sky.

A far-off chorus of yells drifted down the coulee. They came closer and through them were mingled the pounding of many shod hoofs and the crack of rifles and sixshooters. Closer the noises came and closer, until suddenly three fleeing horsemen appeared from behind a shoulder of rock and urged their fagged mounts, with quirt and spur, toward the cabin.

In the lead was Irish Mallory, whipping down both sides of his big gray and glancing often over his shoulder. The other two leaned low on their horses' necks and rode desperately, never once looking back, as if their lives indeed hung in the balance.

A scant hundred yards behind came the pursuers, spurring unmercifully and shooting as they rode. Their horses, like those of the fugitives, were running with noses thrust straight out, ears flattened to their manes.

One of the outlaws half-turned, raised his gun and sent three quick shots into the huddle of pursuers. There came a volley in answer and he lurched, grasped desperately at the saddle-horn, toppled and landed in a heap in the grass in front of the cabin.

The second outlaw slid from the saddle and started on a run for the shack. A rifle cracked and he whirled half around and went to his knees, wavered and fell limply with his face on his arms. It was the most comfortable way to fall, and it not only looked natural, but permitted him to watch the hanging to follow.

The third outlaw—Irish—darted to the cabin and flung his weight desperately against the door. It would not yield a half inch, and the mob behind him yelled hoarsely as they slid from their horses and rushed him.

WITH a catlike jump Irish reached the window, pushed his rifle inside and started to climb in after it. Chip Bennett grabbed his boot. Irish kicked mulishly and had the joy of hearing Chip grunt with the impact. But Cal Emmett got the other foot and they dragged him out and tied him up thoroughly.

"Quit your kicking," said Pink, as

Irish continued to struggle. "You want the whole picture to be nothing but a revolving wheel of arms and legs?"

"I guess I can kick if I want to," Irish retorted. "It's natural under the circumstances, ain't it? Or am I supposed to enjoy being hung? Get busy, these cussed ropes hurt."

"Lay still and they won't," Pink said. "We'll hang you right away if you're good and don't make trouble."

They dragged him over to the tree and cast a rope end over the biggest limb within reach and fixed the noose.

"Boys, don't forget to use the straps!" Thornton Claiborne's voice shrilled from across the hillside, and even the victim laughed.

"You're a heartless bunch," Irish complained. "Quit cackling and get busy."

It was beautifully done. The six posse members struck picturesque attitudes while Irish made his farewell speech.

"Now pull steady and don't jerk me in two," he finished. "Should I shut my eyes?"

"Sure. And kick a little," Chip said callously.

With six men hauling on the rope, Irish went up several feet rapidly. Then Chip took a couple of half-hitches around the tree and they stood back and looked villainous.

From the far coulee rim a rifle cracked unexpectedly and a piece of bark from the tree caught Happy Jack in the chin. Again the rifle cracked, and again, and suddenly there were six less objects to shoot at. A horse jumped and went clattering down the coulee with stirrups flapping and a red streak burned across its flank.

At the second volley, the two dead outlaws scrambled to their feet and dashed to join their friends huddled behind the cabin. Irish opened his eyes.

"Hey, cut it out!" he yelled. "Who's shooting over there? Somebody come and let me down!"

Chip came out and started a rush for the tree. A bullet scorched along his thigh and he retreated, swearing. Irish dangled helplessly in mid-air, saying things his mother had never taught him.

"What's the matter?" Thornton Claiborne called. He started across. A bullet whined past him and smacked into a camera, which gave off a whirring noise and expired.

"It's Mixer Jones!" Irish bellowed. From his higher elevation he could see the marksman. "Come on out, fellows, where he can see you!"

"Not us!" yelled Cal Emmett. "Get him to put the gun down. Them's real bullets!"

"You, Mixer!" screamed Irish Mallory. "Quit that darned foolishness and come down here! You want me to hang here all day? By dogies, if you fire another shot into this coulee I'll spread you out thin all over the map!"

Mixer stood up. His face was a study in bewilderment as he realized that in some fashion he had made another mistake. He started down the rocks, apologizing audibly as he came. As he searched for a foothold, he glanced down into the coulee and observed Chip Bennett limping toward his horse. The foreman carried a rifle and had the air of one bent upon grim vengeance.

Irish had not ceased to mention the horrible things he was going to do to Mixer immediately, as he was being lowered to the ground.

Mixer changed his mind. Instead of continuing to descend, he turned and began to climb rapidly upward. The posse made a dash for its horses, all but the two unhorsed outlaws. Mixer reached the top and disappeared.

THE TWO directors came out from behind the rocks and hurried over to the cabin, where Irish was just being released from his bonds.

"What happened? Who was that? What did he want? Where did he go? Who was he shooting at?" Claiborne stuttered.

"Calm down," Irish ordered crossly. "You just got a little more excitement than you paid for, that's all. Think of me—hanging up there and having somebody strew lead all over the landscape around me! Outa the way—you got your picture."

"Picture?" Thornton screamed. "One of those bullets went through a camera! All we've got now is a lot of spoiled celluloid!"

"We'll spoil that Mixer when we catch him," Irish promised grimly

"Follow our trail," Pink said, grinning, "and we'll give you a real lynching party."

With that, he and Irish spurred off into the dust cloud raised by the others of the posse, leaving the two moving-picture men gazing disconsolately after them.

It was suppertime before the exhausted rannies of the Flying U drifted back to the ranchhouse, abandoning their fruitless search for the elusive Mixer Jones. The Flying U was back to its normal aspect.

"Claiborne?" said Patsy, the cook, in response to their questions. "Gone, both of 'em. . . . Mixer? He's gone too."

"We'll mix him!" Irish growled.

"Not if he caught that train he went after," Patsy said, wiping a frying pan. "Shucks, you don't appreciate Mixer. He meant all right."

"I'd rather have smallpox," Irish grunted.

"Look at it from Mixer's side," Patsy argued—mostly to annoy them. "Here he is out on the range, trailin' a wolf. He hears shooting and yelling and he coyotes over to have a look. He peeks into the coulee and there is a bunch of desperadoes lynching Irish, his friend! What's he gonna do? He forgives Irish freely for chasing him home the other night with a gun. He's gonna return good for bad and save the boy for a more deserved finish. So he cuts loose with his rifle.

"Then picture his confusion when the corpse cuts loose with language which no decent man should use on Sunday. Why, it plumb staggered Mixer. Then he sees what he's done—winged Chip, touched up a couple of horses and got everybody breathing fire and smoke at him. Mixer decided it was time to leave."

"Lucky for him!" Irish snorted.

"He left a message for you," Patsy said soberly. "Said he'd leave the horse he borrowed in Great Falls and never mind about the wages owed him. Said he hoped you wouldn't hold it against him—his intentions was good."

"Intentions!" burst out Irish, and then remembered it was Sunday. "There's a road to a certain place just paved with them intentions," he growled, "and that's where Mixer is headed!"

And so passed Mixer Jones from the life of the Flying U.

•

Buffalo Meat

ATTEMPTS to save the buffalo from extinction originated as far back as 1870. Many connoisseurs of food out of the East judged that buffalo meat was superior to that of domestic cattle. They urged that the herds be confined and bred carefully for their meat.

America, in fact much of the world, might today have a somewhat different type of diet had this worked out.

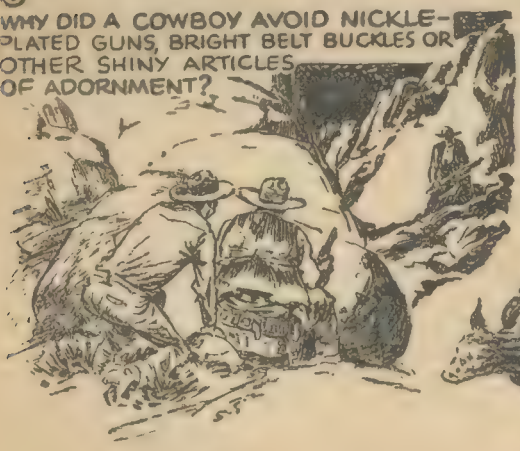
Western folks of the period agreed with the Eastern experts that buffalo meat was tastier, juicier and had a gamy flavor that put it way above ordinary beef. They killed buffalo freely to supply their own wants, but no one ever got around to the idea of domesticating the herds.

Westerners claimed that the best way to prepare buffalo meat was to cut it into strips or steaks not thicker than an inch and a half, salt, and set out to dry for a day or two, then turn over the finished side to expose the other and repeat the process. So prepared, the meat melted in one's mouth, they said. On the long trips to the cattle markets they would kill buffalo along the way and lay out pieces of its meat on their wagon beds for the sun to bake.

—*Sam Brant*

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

① WHY DID A COWBOY AVOID NICKLE-PLATED GUNS, BRIGHT BELT BUCKLES OR OTHER SHINY ARTICLES OF ADORNMENT?



② WHICH WAS MORE DANGEROUS, A BULL OR A RANGE COW?

③ WHICH WAS THE HARDEST BUCKING HORSE, A PINTO OR A WALL-EYED WHITE HORSE?

④ HOW COULD A FRONTIERSMAN TELL WHETHER A FOOTPRINT HAD BEEN MADE BY AN INDIAN OR A WHITE MAN?

⑤ WHEN A SHERIFF CHASED RUSTLERS COULD HE COUNT UPON PUBLIC ASSISTANCE?

The Answers Are on Page 144—If You MUST Look!

THE BADMAN

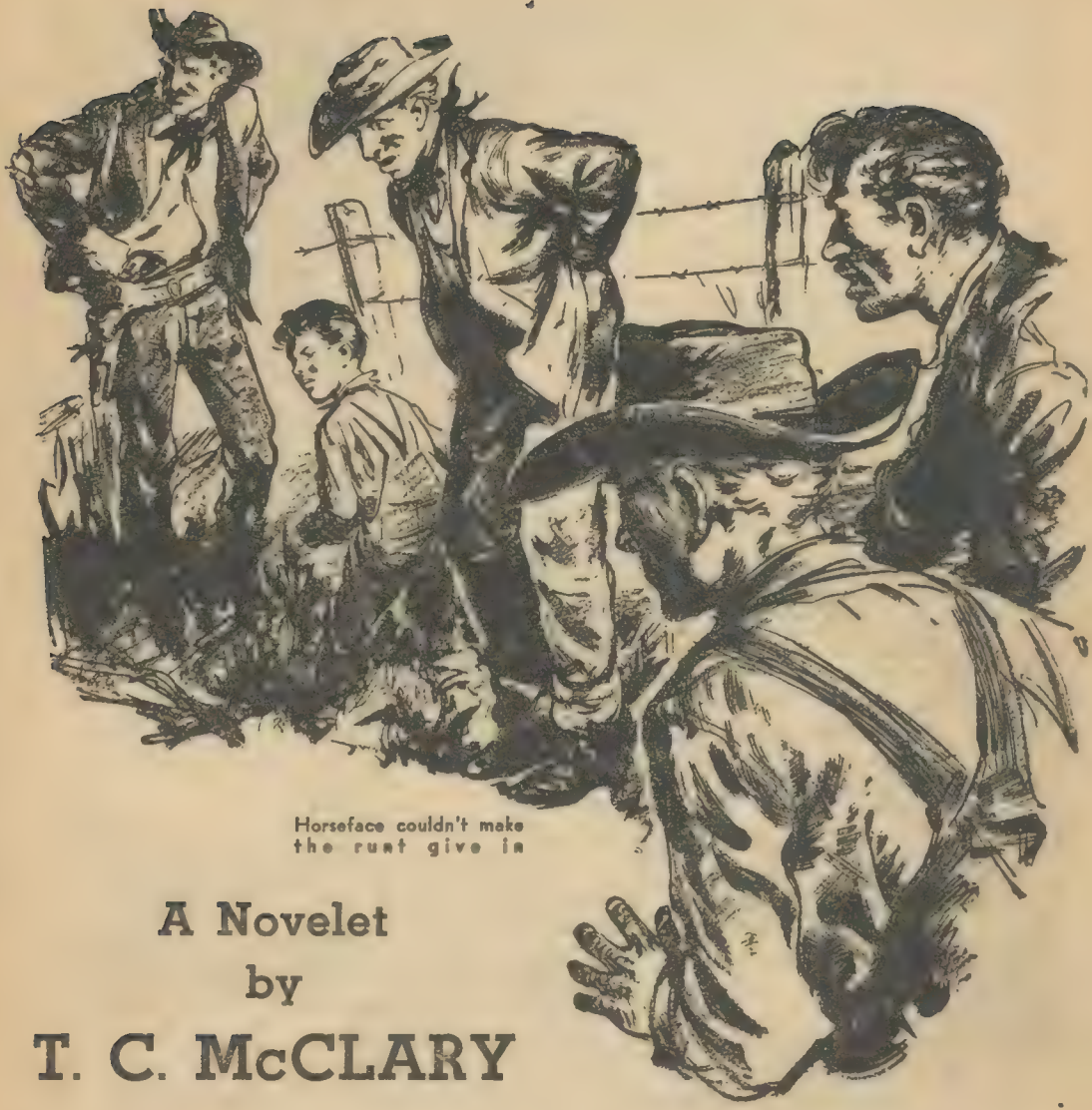
The kid was dazzled by the friendship of the gun king—but he saw only the glitter of fame, not the ruthless, wolf-like nature that lay beneath!

I

THE boy lay in the thick buffalo grass that fringed the rim of small coulee, eyes round as saucers as he watched the man below. The man stood half naked, his body twisted as he tried to reach an ugly black wound on his thigh. He had a gleaming barlow knife in hand and he was trying to cut into the swelling, and it was clear the flesh was mighty tender to the touch. But the thing that seemed to have him roiled was that it was all but impossible for him to reach the area.

The man cursed and gave an oblique slash and blood jetted out. The boy felt worms writhe in his stomach and blurted hoarsely, "Gee willikins!"

The man heard the sound. His body



Horseface couldn't make the runt give in

A Novelet by

T. C. McCLARY

twisted and his hand snapped to his gun and his hard, stubbled face tilted upward. The boy scrambled wildly in the grass and called out shrilly, "I jist come along, mister! I ain't nobody!"

"Don't move or you sure won't be!" the man ordered curtly and drifted his bleak, storm-grey eyes along the rim. "Come down here," he ordered finally.

The boy was afoot now, half turned for flight, but afraid to try it. He said unsteadily, "I'll get my pony."

"You come down on your blasted backside or I'll bring you down like a dead squirrel, nipper!" the man rasped. He didn't look as if he were just talking. The boy let himself over the rim and picked his way down carefully.

The man was built long in the back, his cut angular and corded. He looked

able, and in the habit of handling about anything put up to him. His face was gaunt by nature, hard from experience, and it was not exactly brutal or even cruel, but it held a dangerous callousness that included both things.

HE grabbed the nipper by the ear and shook him hard.

The boy squirmed but locked his small smooth jaws against outcry.

"Who else was up there with you?" the man growled.

"Nobody," the nipper muttered sullenly. "Whatcha trying to do, gotch off my ear?"

"I'll gotch you all right, you try any tricks or lies!" the man rumbled. He gave an extra pressure of his thumb to impress the kid and then released him. The boy was choked with hurt but wouldn't let a whimper out of him. The man's hard mouth touched with rough humor. "Tender as a woman, ain'tcha?"

"I ain't tender!" the boy hollered rawly. "But I ain't no cow, mister!"

The man swept the rim again and put away his gun. He took his barlow knife out of his belt where he had jabbed it and pointed toward the wound. "What would you do if you had that to bawl about, half-pint?"

The boy looked closer and forgot his own miseries. He said, "Gosh, that's snake bite and you've done messed it up awful! You cut it out once already?"

"Burned it out," the man growled, "with powder. But I didn't get it proper."

He considered the boy carefully. He looked nine or ten years old and was a chipmunk at that. But his jaw was clean, his mouth even, and his eyes wide-spaced, blue and steady.

"You got the stomach to cut a proper cross there and pack in fresh powder?" the man asked.

The kid looked up, his evenly tanned face going green and white around the gills. He felt sick and he looked it, but he swallowed hard and nodded. The man held the knife out, but he shook his head and fished in his own pocket. He had to keep swallowing. This wound didn't just look godawful, it smelled to boot.

The boy fished out his own knife, a smaller one, and the man ordered, "Use this one."

"Who's doing this?" the boy yipped. "You want some help, you lemme be!"

The man's mouth twisted with a grin. "Purty damn pert for a little two-bit, ain'tcha? Don't mess that up now. Make the cross deep but even. And don't stop when you start, half pint, or I'll skin you!"

"You look like you'd do it, too!" the boy told him defiantly, but he studied the wound and then sucked a deep breath, and stabbed his knife in, and drew it hard and straight through the bloody, festered mess. The man could get at it for squeezing then. You wouldn't think one body could hold the poison that popped out of there, and the kid suddenly whirled from him and began to retch.

But he was game and ready and he somehow stopped his shakes when the man had mopped the wound clean and handed him an open cartridge. He took pinches of the powder and packed it in. The man gave him a match and grunted, "Make sure that ham gets fried on all sides."

The boy looked at the match and at the wound and up at the man, and then struck the match and steadied himself and put the flame into the center of the cross. Fire jetted and the man winced and cursed but never moved. The boy made slow tracks backward until he came up against a rock and sank down on it, face wet with sweat.

After a long space, he gulped the bad taste in his mouth and then told the stranger with respect, "That must of hurt plenty mister! You wouldn't be Longut Blaine the outlaw, would you?"

The man's eyes narrowed. He had his wound padded and his pants back up by now. He moved across to the boy and stood staring at him. "What do you know about Longut Blaine?" he grunted.

"I know he got his handle crossing Helltop afoot when a horse posse didn't have the guts to follow," the boy said with awkward hero worship.

The outlaw's suspicion died in his low chuckle. "So you know that story, do you? What do you think of a man like that?"

"I'd think he was mighty fine if he just didn't go killing everybody in sight," the boy mumbled. "Or mebbe it ain't the killings I hold against him as much as the ropedraggings and brandings and such."

Longut scowled. "You hear a heap of stories ain't always true," he rasped. "Little men trying to make themselves feel big talking down a better man, or building him up as a hardcase with the dirty tricks they'd like to pull themselves but ain't got the guts to try."

The boy's head lifted and the desire to believe swept across his face in waves. "Gee, you mean you . . . I mean, him, Longut Blaine . . . never did none of them low things and folks just talk them out of being jealous or mean?"

"Littlebit," Longut told him, "I know Blaine better'n any man alive and I'll tell you he never did one mean act that wasn't called for. I don't claim him a saint, but he is a man who'll stand on his own and face any odds any time."

"Gee, I'm glad to know that!" the boy muttered and then flamed, for he knew this was Longut Blaine who had robbed and shot up the next county a few weeks back and he didn't want it to look as if he were trying to soft soap him.

Longut chuckled and hitched at his belts, liking the oil of homage in the way of his kind. But he respected the kid for the way he'd done the nasty chore of fixing that wound.

"What's yore handle, pard?" he asked.

"R-r-r-runt Neeley," the boy stuttered with burning self-consciousness.

"About a ton of guts in that runt body," the outlaw allowed. "But it's worth a better handle. We'll call you, lessee, how about the Coyote Kid, recollecting the sharp way you were trailing me?"

The kid grinned and tried not to show his pleasure and took a stirrup lift up the side of the coulee to where his own pony was ground hitched.

"I'll ride you in," Longut told him. "And I'll have a proud word to say for you, Coyote, when I meet up with your pa."

"My pa's dead," the boy murmured on a small, somber note. He moved uneasily in his saddle. "And I don't reckon you'd want to tell a woman like my ma about a messy thing like snakebite, would you?"

LONGUT wouldn't have thought twice about telling a woman anything that came into his mind. But he saw how the boy felt and it crossed his humor that the boy was putting him on good manners more thoroughly than many big men who had tried and mostly died.

Crossing the mesa, Longut asked, "Your ma have to support the family, Coyote?"

"Well . . ." the boy stalled with decent shame and pride. "She's had to pinch and scramble. But she won't no more!"

"Getting a new pa soon?" the outlaw guessed.

The boy made a gesture, shutting that possibility away. "She won't have to on account of I'm big enough now to manage things for us."

Longut's eyes sparked. "You done proved yourself a man all right. But ain't you a mite small for anything like cowboying or timbering or mule skinning?"

"Shucks, that's for them as has strong backs and weak heads," the kid told him. "Me, I aim to be a business man. I've got me a trap line come winter times and a deal with Sol Levi to buy my furs for lining women's mackinaws. Come spring and I've already got me some mustang colts half gentled. And next summer I aim to start me my real business, a buckboard express service to the hill camps that don't get no service now but once a month when the big slow freighters make the rounds."

He pointed off at a draw in a purple bluff and allowed, "There's my colts."

The outlaw nodded, "You're all right, son, and I will tell you something may save you some trouble. Any hombre ever

tries to chase you off or hurt your business, you just tell 'em they'll answer up to your friend, Longut Blaine, soon as you can find him."

"*Friend!*" the boy breathed and rode along with a foolish grin. He knew what that meant, and so did the country, for Longut was as noted for his rare loyalties as for the ruthlessness of his vengeance, and it was not many he let call him friend.

A figure came out of a hollow riding toward them, a townsman judging from the lightness of his flesh and his town clothes. He drew rein abreast and grinned at the boy, but he caught the bad hombre smell of Longut, and worry was a quick spark in his eyes.

The boy said, "Burt, this here's a friend of mine, keeping me trail company."

The two men nodded briefly and the townsman studied the boy. "Tried to find you to ride out to Sixteen Mile with me." It gave the boy an out to switch company if he wanted it but Coyote looked away with embarrassment and seemed to prefer his present company.

"Well, see you later then," the townsman grunted and covered his feelings at the slight. Nodding again, they all passed their separate ways.

"Kinfolk?" Longut asked later.

"Naw, that's Burt Sheldon, express agent," the boy told him. "But a friend as good as kinfolk! It was Burt gave me the job to make the money for this pony outfit."

"Made you earn it, did he?" the gun king grunted with a note of scorn. "Now if I cottoned to a friend and he needed something, I'd figure to just give it to him, outright."

"Oh, Burt ain't stingy," the boy told him with quick loyalty. "But he's mighty set on what he calls thrift and industry. He says nothing ain't worthwhile unless you work and pay the price for it."

Longut thought of the money in his saddlebags and his eyes twinkled. "Well, mebbe there's some can't get it any easier way," he chuckled. "But I figure a smart head and a little grit makes up for a heap of sweat and backbreaking."

II

THEY rode the first reaching tide of shadows into the town that sprawled upon the tawny plain. Moving through the fringe of shacks and poorer dwellings, the boy nodded to a mite of a house that was yet neat and pretty as a calendar. It was whitewashed 'dobe, with a laboriously made pond and weeping willow out in front, and a riot of flowers all tended behind a picket fence.

"That's our shack," the boy told him, and his voice held decent pride in the effort his mother had put into it. Then he turned somber with the impact of a boy's inward conflict. This notorious outlaw had trusted him to hold a knife at his back, and given him the right to call him friend, but what did you do with an outlaw friend where your own mother was concerned?

The nipper shifted awkwardly in his saddle and said on a muffled tone, "I dunno as ma would expect me to have company, but I reckon . . ."

The outlaw reached out and roughed his shoulder. "Coyote," he told him bluntly, "this is a good time to learn, you'll make a heap of friends along the trail who ain't quite housebroken."

A woman was coming down the path with a light step, a half-curious, half-welcoming smile on her pretty face which she held a little tilted as she studied the stranger.

The boy said with a rush of importance and self-consciousness, "Ma, this is my friend. . . ."

Longut touched his hat and smiled, and then he saw recognition flash through the woman and freeze her welcome. It struck him she'd be the slip of a girl Ace Neeley had sneaked off from the North Platte country and hidden even from his own partners when the outfit's activities grew too reckless.

His face went sober, and for that moment, touched with deep respect. He said, "M'am, this colt of yours has done proved himself a full man today and I reckon he must have the same iron as his pa."

She fought to keep the feelings from

her expression, but there was some question in her eyes that turned the blue almost black. "His father," she said, "was a cattleman of account." That was for the boy's benefit she said that, for the question was still in her eyes, and Longut guessed it.

He said gravely, "I knew a cattleman by the same name once; was with him down toward Stockton when we got stampeded." He pulled a small, jeweled turnip watch from his pocket and studied it while it dangled, and then held it out for the boy to take. "That was his, ma'am. We never knew where to send it."

The catch of her breath was like the call of a high bird, and suddenly she tipped away her face, for it was wet.

"After all this time!" she murmured finally, and he knew that he had put a haunting doubt to rest. Ace Neeley had never been identified, and this was likely the first time she could be absolutely sure that he was dead.

She made a gesture toward the house. "If you were a friend of his . . ."

He took off his hat. "Thank you, ma'am, but I was only a trail friend. I have just been schooling your boy here on the meaning of that."

He saw the understanding in her eyes where there might well have been bitterness instead, and felt the tug of a man's regret when he looks upon a good and handsome woman and realizes the barriers of his own habits and past. Ace Neeley had tried to bridge the barrier and paid with his life, for he had tried to eliminate killing from his business, but the same spirit had not been in the deputy who ambushed him.

He looked at the boy who was staring at the watch with eyes ashine but not a sound coming from his set lips. The outlaw said, "Your pa left some money too, Coyote. When I meet up with you I'll give account of it."

But beyond the boy, the woman shook her head with violent pleading. "Just the watch is all we'd want, Mister. . . .?" she murmured huskily.

"Blaine," he told her, and let her see he understood, and then he left.

He rode into town feeling salty with the stoked-up memory of his old friendship for Ace Neeley; it put a new and deeper value on his liking for the boy. Out of long habit, the top of his mind was conscious of every face and shadow that he passed. He saw recognition flame, and the word run in mounting waves down the street ahead, and the crowd rushed out to pay him homage and silently acknowledge his gunman's glory.

Ordinarily, this was like sweet cool water to his thirsty vanity and pride, but right now he shucked it off and found it slightly irritating. His feelings were seven years back, with Ace Neeley siding him in a tough corner, and out of unnamable stirrings, of old friendship, his thoughts went back to the coulee that afternoon, and the green-gilled kid swallowing down his shaking sickness to perform a rank, ugly job better than many a man had.

"What you'd expect of Ace's boy!" he thought. He turned under a blistered board arch through a broad alley and came out into the streaming gold and crimson sundown light that filled Hogan's dusty stableyard.

A welcoming committee had beat him there, using the back doors and alleys, an important committee as things went, these being the town's leading tradesmen. Bramhall, who owned the Hondo saloon was foremost, a man built like a solid rubber ball and looking like one after a bear-dog had chewed a little on it. He was scowling ferociously at Knox, who owned the Longhorn, a gaunt, lean figure with the sad countenance of a preacher and the devil's own heart in his chest.

Both these men had rushed to get the famed outlaw to make their particular saloons his headquarters, knowing well the hatred of the adjoining county the boys around here had. They'd flock to shake the hand of the gunman who had made a fool of the sheriff over there and stood off the whole county single handed. The other merchants had much the same idea in view. It would mean a heap to them if Longut Blaine saw fit to buy a

gun or order a new holster or have his saddle patched, and they were willing to pay the price for his favor.

THIS was a routine Longut knew full well. It made a gun king's stay in town a profitable business, quite aside from the suckers who fought to lose to him at poker, or the various and sundry deals offered him that were not quite rope-bait. He sat in his saddle looking them over, reading their cupidity and greed and eagerness, a merchant in his own way who could judge accurately the value of his favor and knew how to gouge the limit.

The saloon owners had first call on him by tradition, but he let them steam each other up while he swung down stiffly, and gave Hogan special orders for his coal black gelding, and took his arrogant good time to ease his muscles. The crowd had grown when he came back to the stable doors and stepped out into the fierce glow of sundown. There was some minor scuffle at the back of the crowd as some pushing kid was chased off.

Then he heard a boyish voice proclaiming stubbornly, "You danged fool, you think I'd horn in if I wasn't wanted? You lemme through or Longut ain't going to like it!"

The boy was sore and he was stubborn, but there was nothing fresh about him. He was just declaring his rights and standing by them.

The gun king lifted his head and swept an arrogant gaze across the crowd. "That young Neeley, the Coyote Kid?" he demanded. "Give that wild Injun passage, boys, he's my business manager from now on!"

The whole crowd turned, half grinning, half surprised, and jostled fast to give the boy room, suddenly friendly with him and giving him his importance, clapping him on the shoulder and chuckling jokes at him as he went through.

He hadn't bargained for this and he came through with his face scalding, but Longut grinned and said, "Boys, this nipper's done earned his handle . . . he's the Coyote Kid now, a bear-strangling, nail-chewing, one-man stampede, and the only man living can claim he told Longut Blaine to mind his business and made him take it standing."

The crowd yipped and cheered and the boy shuffled in the dust and turned solid purple.

Longut said, "Well now, Coyote, you got a business decision to make for us unless I'm mighty mistaken; you've got to dicker with them two smiling sidewinders and figure which saloon we aim to call home."

Knox said quickly, "Runt—I mean, Coyote—you'll recollect I never threw you out or turned you down for popcorn."

Bramhall let out a derisive snort and boomed, "I reckon Coyote knows who it was talked him up on his real business deal to Sol Levi, and who'll talk business with him the way it should be talked right now!"

Longut rolled a smoke and watched the boy's embarrassment with amusement. It was pretty clear he didn't want to side with either barkeep. His small face screwed up with serious intensity and he darted Longut fleeting glances.

"Well," the outlaw allowed, reading his uncertainly, "what are you conniving up for us, pardner?"

The boy signalled him to lean down and whispered, and suddenly Longut broke out with a roar of mirth that spooked every pony in the stable. "Gawdamighty, that beats any offer they could make!" he chortled.

Bramhall hitched at his round belly and allowed, "Short of taking over my business, he won't figure a deal I won't meet and better!"

Blaine's bleak eyes twinkled and he guffawed, "Don't boast too fast, friend, the kid's got a new kind of deal figured."

Knox grunted, "Whatever it is, it ain't anything I won't go better than that human mule skinner!" and he glared at Bramhall.

Blaine grinned and made a gesture. "Well, it is like this gentlemen; he figures this a matter we shouldn't show favor in."

"You aim to flip a coin?" Knox asked.

Blaine shook his head, humor rippling through him. "Not this wild buckaroo," Long chuckled. "He wants a real red blooded he-man's way of settlement. He figures you two ought to settle this with fists, and we'll take our trade to the winner."

Both barkeeps' mouths gaped, and the crowd blasted the stableyard with its riotous humor. There had been a long-standing feud between the two saloon owners and now they had their chance to settle things and no way out of it. Bramhall thought of mentioning his arthritis and Knox thought of bringing up his occasional whiskey cough, but one glance at the crowd showed the boys weren't going to let them get away with it.

But somebody said, "There ain't no money in this deal. Coyote, I thought you were a business man!"

"I am," the boy countered. "I figure to rent this yard, if Mr. Hogan says all right, and charge a looksee at this battle of the century."

Hogan had his instant of financial optimism, caught the glint of Longut Blaine's gaze upon him, and nodded at Coyote with a sigh. This was Saturday with the whole county in for its month-end blowoff, and the boy began to pass the hat among the crowd already gathered.

"Two bits for the pit, fifty cents for the three front rows, and fifty cents for them on the corral bars."

He stopped in front of the now fuming, swaggering Bramhall and the saloon keeper broke off his braggadocio to stare.

"You ain't going to try and charge a contestant, be you?" he demanded in astonishment.

Coyote said, "Why there ain't no contest from what you just been talking. It is a slaughter and you'll have the best looksee there is."

Bramhall caught the impact of deep-chested mirth at his expense and flamed and started to give the boy a quarter.

But Coyote shook his head and said gravely, "No sir, Mr. Bramhall, you're front line. That'll be half a dollar."

III

THIS was probably the greatest curse-and-miss fight the country had ever seen, an incident so hilarious it was bound to be a standard laugh for at least a year, and it gave the Coyote Kid his own piece of glory for figuring it. It ended in a draw when both saloon keeps had yelled and swung themselves plumb out of breath, leaving things at a standoff so that Bramhall and Knox still had to bargain to get the outlaw's favor and ended up with both paying him double what they had intended and splitting the business between them.

This, of course, was a smart trick Coyote figured when he saw they were both too winded and roiled up to think straight, for they had the only two saloons in town and the trade must have come to them anyway if they'd struck their own private bargain. The boy was riding high with the acknowledgement he got as a smart trader.

"Well, Coyote, I reckon you can get you about the flashiest outfit there is with your share," Longut allowed as he split the money even.

The Coyote Kid moved awkwardly in his boots and admitted lamely, "Well, I had kind of figured something else."

The gun king grunted thoughtlessly, "Boy, don't ever forget to flash your pride and jingle your glory for the herd." Then he felt the boy's confusion and asked, "What was it you intended?"

"Oh, I'd kinda figured to buy my ma a new dress and then mebbe to put the rest down on the buckboard I'll be needing for my fast freight service."

"Well, your ma now, I should be downright shamed for not thinking of her first," Longut admitted.

The boy flicked him with an uncertain glance. "How about the buckboard?"

"Well, you do what you want, but I'd figure business comes to the man puts on the best front and you need that first. And shucks, there'll be plenty more mazuma, nipper, if we have to turn this town upside down and shake it!"

The boy took two or three days puzzling over that and finally compromised, getting his ma rigged out in the first new dress she'd seen for a long time, and then getting himself the flashiest outfit the town had. The range boys grinned and gave approval and the other kids regarded him with mixed envy and awe. Coyote began to feel his power and right to strut and crow a bit, and it crossed him hard that the only man who didn't tell him he was pretty smart was Burt Sheldon.

It happened this way, that he went down to the express office to show off his new outfit. Burt gave him a decent compliment and grin but allowed with faint disapproval, "That is a mighty swell and flashy getup, Runt, but it's going to get kind of messy at your cleaning job."

Well, first off, Burt still called him *Runt* and disregarded his new handle, and then there was that thread of disapproval in his voice where Coyote felt he had a right to respect for his smartness. Finally, there was the reminder of his old job.

He shuffled awkwardly and looked down at the floor, and finally blurted, "Aw, Burt, you wouldn't expect a fella to go on doing a lowdown chore after he's proved hisself a sharp promoter and gotten into the big money!"

"Well, I can see your point," Burt admitted, but he didn't sound it. The boy suddenly blushed, recollecting that Sheldon had done that clean-up job himself until he made room, and pay, for him to do it. Likely he would now do the job again.

Coyote felt kind of mean about it, but a fellow couldn't go on wasting his time at small stuff when he'd dropped his loop onto big time. "You pay anything down on your buckboard yet?" the express agent asked.

"Naw," Coyote answered with a mixture of scorn and swagger to hide his conscience on the matter. "But I ain't worried. There'll be plenty more money where the last come from!"

"Where was that?" Sheldon asked.

"The suckers," the kid told him. "When you've got a friend like Longut Blaine, there's twenty thousand angles!"

"Unh," Sheldon breathed, and his brow furrowed. He was fond of this boy and of his mother, and the news that she had finally learned her husband was dead had given him a hope he might take the place of the boy's father.

The kid said, "Well," and hitched at his belts with self-importance, "I've got to be getting about my business." He gave a nod that was a little overreaching and moved off with his new silver Spanish spurs jangling.

He found Longut holding a gun king's court on the stoop of the Longhorn, but the outlaw broke off his quietly boastful story to grin at the boy.

"Now you're beginning to polish up your handle!"

The Kid thought, what a hell of a difference in appreciation this was! Without meaning any disloyalty, blurted out his feelings, "Burt Sheldon didn't figure I was too smart."

"Oh, he didn't?" Longut asked on a hard tone, and his eyes splintered arrogant fire. "Well, you tell Mr. Sheldon that Longut Blaine figures you smart as hell and not needing any criticism for making more in one day than he makes in a month at that grubbing job!"

"Oh, he wasn't mean about it," the boy said quickly. "I reckon it's just he's so used to playing things quiet and cautious, Longut, he don't see that men like us don't need to be so careful."

The outlaw chuckled and found his liking for the boy growing. He thought what a hell of a high riding gunhand he could make of a boy like this. He could make him into the greatest gun king of the West, and it would be worth doing; it would leave his own name that much deeper branded for building a man who was even tougher and faster and more cunning than he was.

HE said to the boy, "Well, pardner, how much mazuma you got left?"

"Not much," the boy admitted. But on a boastful tone he added, "That won't last long!"

"No?" Longut plied him.

"No sirree," Coyote nodded vehemently. "I aim to start me my own outfit, and the right buckaroos will pay to get into it, and I am going to contract for the odd chores around this town, and sew the work up tight for my bunch and take a share on it!"

Smoky humor drifted through Longut's eyes. "You just tell these tradesmen I'm behind you in this business," he chuckled, "and let me know any of them don't figure they've got some work for you, Coyote."

The boy grinned and felt the crowd's homage to the gun king spreading out to him. By gosh, there were grown buckaroos around ready to give him a dollar to become a member of his outfit.

"Toll," they laughed, "so we can get into town without running afoul of your tough bunch, Coyote."

The boys his own age were easy and he gouged them, all except Horseface Callahan, who found his own bullying prestige suddenly ventilated. Horseface sulked with a tough kid's roiled pride that he'd been dispossessed by a half pint.

Now the Coyote Kid had never had a run-in with Horseface for the simple reason that he had never aspired to running the young fry or challenging the young bully's wicked fists. But his new status was different. It was in Horseface's bailiwick, and Callahan was simmering in black rage and jealousy. It was clear something would come of it, and the boys built the matter up on both ends. Longut Blaine took occasion to raise the subject when he had Coyote out on the range teaching him real pistol shooting.

"There come times," he told the boy, "when a man ain't got any choice of guts and has to use common sense to even a one-way score, but that's the time when a man's fairness is liable to be his own undoing. Now take this Horseface: he is thirty pound heavier than you and three years older, but sooner or later you are going to have to wipe that sullen look off his face, pardner."

The Coyote Kid looked at his saddlehorn and colored, and admitted uncomfortably, "Yeah, the showdown's coming."

"When it comes," Longut advised, "just remember he's got the advantage as things is, and no matter how, you've still got to lick him. Don't ever forget nipper . . . win fair if you can, but win in any case, and don't let your pride tumble you in the dust on the herd's level."

"I ain't scared," the boy gritted on a tight note. "But he is mighty tough in rough and tumble."

"Don't give him the chance to mix up with you that way," Longut said and gave a slow wink. "Hit him with a piece of kindling wood or kick him down from your saddle."

"Gee!" Coyote murmured, eyes big with the picture and swallowing hard. "Ain't that kind of brutal?"

"Not as brutal as what he'd like to do to you," Longut grunted. And then he snorted with his breed's arrogance. "Just keep in mind you don't dirty your hands on common fry, and his kind ain't even got the right to look slant-eyed at you!"

Things stayed like this a space, except that Coyote was getting to bluster and swagger and grow cocky, cutting the figure Longut seemed to approve of. And Longut, bored with the town, but not ready to move along yet, was growing arrogant and edgy, and on two occasions flared into violence, messing two drunken waddies up pretty badly with a gun whipping. They'd asked for the trouble and there were plenty to take the gun king's part, but the sheer merciless violence of his attack left the town gasping. More than a few took it for sign of how quick Longut would flash and the ruthlessness of his attack when the mood struck him, and now it was remembered that he had robbed a lot of innocent people as well as those he had the grudge against when he robbed the bank over in the next county.

Nothing much was said about it for clear reasons of survival. But it was a thought in men's eyes, and the respect and homage he'd been getting began to

dwindle to the tougher element. Two fathers found chores for their young galoots out on range away from Coyote's influence.

Horseface saw that and read it rightly and let his simmering pride explode with contemptuous challenge. He swung around the corner of the blacksmith's one day when Coyote was sitting by on his pony. Horseface came to a dead halt and watched Coyote with an insolent glare and finally jeered, "Well, if it ain't the shadow of gawdam'ghty!"

Coyote paled and swung his horse onto the bully and told him shrilly, "You mean to aim any cracks at Longut Blaine, you'd best get a board in your pants' seat fast!"

"I ain't aiming no cracks at a man who'll stand on his own like him," Horseface growled. "All I'm saying is you can't hold your own outfit together even with him behind you! Except for him, your own backside would be too hot to sit that saddle!"

"I done warned you to be careful!" Coyote shrilled.

"*You* done warned me!" Horseface snorted with scorn. "Why I could sweep this yard with you like a broom with one hand tied, you damned swell-headed little tinhorn shadow!"

A GRINNING, mischievious crowd was gathering, rawhiding both the boys and sparking up the challenge. It was more than Coyote's new found pride could bear. But he couldn't fight Horseface on equal terms and he knew it, and his inner conflict suddenly broke into a boy's berserk wildness.

He clamped spurs to his pony, using the new trick Longut had taught him to jump his horse forward. He smacked Horseface down before he could jump clear, holding him tangled in the dirt beneath the pony's flirting hoofs. The pony was getting wild itself at this commotion, and in frenzy thrashing its hoofs harder. It was getting to the point where it would do Horseface real damage, when Big Ben, the smith, came charging out to grab the bridle and pull the pony clear.

"Boy, you gone plumb loco with a big head and pride?" he demanded of Coyote.

Horseface had clawed to his feet and melted against the shop wall blubbering, but swearing vengeance for all that, and most of the crowd were with him. Big Ben let Coyote's bridle go with a gesture of disgust.

"I can recollect when every man in this town was glad to see you and take your part," he grunted.

Coyote sat there with shame purpling him, suddenly realizing the wildness of his action. He was ready to make decent apology even if it scorched his pride, but just then the flat twang of Longut's metallic voice slammed through them.

"What would you want him to do, sit up there and eat the insults of a bully three times his size?" Longut asked. "I'd figure Horseface came off lucky and better eat humble pie after this. If Coyote'd wanted, he could have used that loaded quirt of his as well."

Big Ben looked grim and growled, "They're still boys . . . they've got some time to wait for mayhem!"

"I figure even a boy is just as big as he can make another see him," Longut allowed on that same flat, dangerous note. "I figure about Coyote just the way I would about myself."

There was no answer to that that Big Ben cared to give, and he clamped his mouth and contented himself with one defiant look at Longut, then swung back to his forge with his leather apron slapping. Coyote felt better. He saw the impact Longut's approval had on the crowd. Not even the disapproving dared speak up to him; they didn't have the guts to openly defy him, and that pretty much proved exactly what he'd said.

But there was one man there who didn't look impressed: Burt Sheldon, standing with his elbow-length black dust sleeves still on and a sheaf of ladings still clutched in one hand. His eyes were flaming with a bitter anger he suppressed, and there was a drawn setness in the lines of his face as he blew against his lips, waiting for the crowd to break and drift.

They were left alone finally and Longut leaned with his shoulder blades against the wall and watched the express agent with narrowed eyes and a face that held contempt.

"Thought you were a friend of Coyote's too," he grunted. "You don't look happy he proved himself top man."

Sheldon said on a dry note, "It wasn't long ago that he didn't have to prove it, but I figure he'd have taken the odds and the licking and proved it that way if he had to."

The boy scorched and muttered hotly, "I ain't scared of him with fists, Burt, if that's what you're getting at!"

Sheldon commented, "There's only one way you'll ever prove that now, Runt, and the range won't ever let you forget it!"

Longut straightened and his eyes looked like molten lead. "Mister, I don't figure he's got anything more to prove!" he snapped. "He's done shown he can handle trouble when it's put at him, and where I come from, that ends it!"

Sheldon was white along the edges of his jaws and his mouth was dry and strain pulled at his lips. But he swung to meet the gun king's blazing gaze and held it as he said, "Longut, you may be bigger than this whole country, but you don't have to live here and he does for a long space yet."

The boy was scared now at the rise of temper between these two and out of his disturbance felt the tug of old loyalty.

"Aw, Burt, what's all the holler for?" he yipped. "Horseface asked for trouble and he got it. He ain't hurt much."

"I don't give a damn how much that bully's hurt," Burt answered to the boy's surprise. "What I'm talking about is what this does to hurt the respect you got from everybody before you began riding so high and mighty."

"Aw," Coyote blurted through hot tears that suddenly choked him, "I'll fight him with fists and clear the whole doggoned thing up if that suits you!"

Sheldon inclined his head. "Not for me, but for your own self respect," he noted.

"All right," the boy choked.

"You take a ride now and cool off, Coyote," Longut grunted and whacked his pony to start him. Then he stood with his legs spraddled and his head hung forward, staring bleakly at Sheldon through the filtering dust. "Friend," he said, "that is a mighty long nose you've got, and a mighty possessive manner with that boy."

Sheldon said grimly, "It is time somebody took the swell out of his head. He was the best-liked boy this town had."

"He still is, I reckon, or I'd like to hear the contrary," the gun king rasped. "What are you stirring him up to fist fight a boy he can't even reach for?"

"He'll reach him all right, unless he's changed more than I think," Sheldon answered with no trace of doubt.

"He had better, or you'll pay for it!" Longut stated on a flatted note. "Because, mister, if he don't win that fight when it comes about, you'd best be wearing a gun if you're still around at sunup!"

"He'll win even if he loses!" Sheldon said, for all that he had to force the words from lips that stuck. "That's what he needs to find out."

"That don't make sense," Longut snorted. "But what I said does about sunup!"

For a long moment, the outlaw stared at him with those hard merciless eyes, then spat, and swung his tough knotted frame across to the Longhorn.

Big Ben came to the shop doorway and allowed, "Burt, you're like to go to hell for that boy if he turns yellow in his fallen pride."

The young express agent wiped clammy hands on a handkerchief and gave a feeble smile. "I'd be in hell anyway if that's how he proves out. His ma would think that in the pinch, I was afraid to help him."

Nobody but Big Ben had heard the conversation, but the primitive instincts of the country were strong and men were quick to smell out trouble. It was recollected that square Burt Sheldon had been almost like a father to the nipper until Longut had come around.

Enough of the gossip caught the ear of Coyote to make him deeply conscious of being the cause of bad blood between two of his good friends.

IV

HE was in a mood for a few days, trying to figure a way he could come out on top, but in the end it all boiled down to the promise he'd made Burt Sheldon. He clamped his boyish jaws and faced cold fear and licked it, and sent word to Horseface that he was a yellow cur and he'd meet him and prove it at Hogan's stables that Saturday evening.

Horseface was there, swaggering before the young bunch, but given a serious jolt at the audience of older men who poured into the yard when the Coyote Kid came trudging down the alley like a man going to meet his doom, but unwavering in his determination. The runt nodded and threw aside his hat and stripped off his fancy spurs and chaps and gauntlets.

He had turned down Longut's offer to second him with an honest excuse that fear of the gun king might affect Horseface.

The Coyote Kid took a look around the sea of faces and saw Burt Sheldon's quiet confident grin and wink, and that put warmth into veins that had felt frozen. Even if he lost this scrap, it was worth it to prove Sheldon's long friendship hadn't been wasted.

He winked back at Sheldon and wigwagged at Longut, then balled his fists and came straight out into the center of the cleared space, nodding at Horseface that he was ready. The bully misread his readiness for confidence and suspected a trick, and that gave the half pint the advantage of first licks. He piled in like a pepperbox until his punches and the crowd's roar of approval got Horseface good and mad.

He didn't have much chance after that, but he fought with everything that was in him, and the worst pummelling the bigger, older boy could give him failed to drag an admission of defeat from his locked jaws. After half an hour, Horseface had him beaten to a pulp but still couldn't make the runt give in, and he was worn out himself with the effort of the licking he had given him.

"Gawdamighty!" he gasped finally as he staggered off. "I ain't got no more wind. . . . I don't want to kill him!"

The boys broke it up then with whoops and grins, clearly giving the fight to Horseface, but their respect to Coyote.

It was Burt Sheldon who came out of the crowd and lifted Coyote in his arms to tote him home, meeting Longut's cold glare with steady eyes and a barely perceptible nod when Longut's lips formed the word, "Sunup." Longut didn't see the express agent after that, and he stood staring at the bar, swirling his drink alone, in an ugly mood.

All through the bar, the boys were still chuckling and hashing over the fight, and slowly the fact strained through the gun king's black raw mood that Sheldon had known what he was talking about. There was a new respect for the half pint in men's voices. Coyote had lost to Horseface, but he'd won something more valuable.

That was in men's tones, and memory of his boyish honesty and loyalties and hard work was sprinkled through the conversation. Suddenly, Longut Blaine realized that the things men were picking to respect in Coyote were the things he'd learned from Sheldon and not from him. This was a jolt that smashed him harder than a bullet, for there had been this one softness in his rawhide nature, that he had found the son of one of the few men he'd ever counted a real friend, and liked him with feelings akin to those of a father. But now the thing that would give the boy a right to decent self respect and pride were the teachings of another man . . . a damned townsman, at that, who'd train him to respectability and law.

For a blazing instant, jealousy put a dangerous glint into his eye, and drew his scarred lips hard against his teeth. But he looked down the bar and saw

Big Ben, the blacksmith, and others of the better element. Big Ben was chuckling and shaking his head with pride almost as if Coyote had been his own boy, and he was booming in his deep-chested voice.

"You can range 'em in any country, but the breed comes through in a pinch! With all the fancy outfit and easy money and high-riding pride, he had the guts under it to take that licking and never whimper, and don't forget, gents, he knew damned well when he made the challenge what he was in for!"

Something heavy thudded down inside the gun king, dragging his pride and jealousy down with it. He felt a raw hotness in his throat, and the blast of a man's admission of what is good and what is bad shook him like a desert wind. He moved outside and turned out to the fringe of town and stood close beside the boy's house.

He heard the boy gulp through stiff, beaten jaws, "I ain't complaining, I had that coming, but if you don't figure too harsh on me, Burt, I want to know can I have back my job?"

Sheldon's voice came gravely gentle, easy with confidence and understanding.

"Shucks, Runt," he answered, "you never lost it. I just been filling in for you for a spell."

The break of a woman's swiftly choked sob of gladness followed, and after a long spell, Blaine heard the boy's mother say, "Burt, it was good of you, but what now?"

There was a pause and then Sheldon's voice came again. "Don't worry, Emma, things always somehow work out."

Longut swung from the building with a hot dry fire burning behind his eyeballs. He felt the emptiness of a man's wasted life pressing down upon him, and he turned out on the prairie and stood for a great space unmoving, looking out into the dimming afterglow of sundown. He could pass Sheldon up for what he'd done, and what it would mean to the boy, but he'd made his boast and that was one thing he could not pass up. Yet if he killed Sheldon, the boy would hate even Longut's memory and the boy was the one shimmering bright spot he could see in his black and reckless life.

HE went back to the saloon and stood there drinking alone clean through the night. At dawn he went out and spur-dragged angrily around to Hogan's stables. He had just saddled his horse and led it out when the bruised and swollen half pint came scuffing out of the shadows, head down and looking at the ground.

"I reckon you're feeling mighty shamed of me, Longut," the boy mumbled. "I don't reckon I did you proud atall."

"Proud?" Longut repeated. His tone was hoarse and stuck in his throat. "Why, Coyote, they'll still be telling of the grit you showed when you come twenty!"

The boy looked up then and his eyes were glossy in the dim dawn light. "I've got something to tell," he said with fierce boyish honesty. "I been ducking that fight a long spell. It took both you and Burt to make me tackle it, and it don't seem right one of you should go kill the other over it when it was your fight too, kinda."

Longut frowned and blew against his lips and finally grunted, "I've done made my brag; I can't walk out, Coyote."

"Then you've got to let me have a piece of your fight too, to make things even," the shaver muttered. "I've already loaded Burt Sheldon's pistol, figuring you'd let me do the same for you."

"Boy," the gun king asked him gravely, "you want blood on your hands, too?"

"If I caused it, I've got to be part of the finish too," the boy muttered stubbornly. "Same as you and Burt took my trimming with me, in a way."

The gun king gave a hard smile of understanding and broke his gun to dump the shells out of it, and gave the empty .44 to the boy to load. The Kid had brought his own bullets and Longut figured that was part of the price the boy felt he had to pay. He knew a passing pride in the way the boy slammed

the cylinder, closed and spun it. That, at least, was something he'd taught him, and maybe in time, that gunmanship would help him even if he grew respectable.

He slipped the gun back in his holster and led the way out through the still shadowed alley, and ground-hitched his horse as the street filled with flushing bands of clearer light, and suddenly, the first broad flat golden shaft of sunup.

A figure came out into the center of the street and moved slowly toward him, and Longut wigwagged at the boy, and moved out into the deep thick dust.

He had never given another gunman a break in his life but he did now; he called at thirty feet, "Stand and draw, Sheldon!"

The express agent was grey, but his eyes were steady and he pulled his gun and aimed before Longut even moved. Then Longut's hand streaked and his gun barked first, but Sheldon fired nevertheless.

He knew he'd hit Sheldon, he knew he had to. At thirty feet the shot was apple pie. But the man had not budged, his body had not even quivered, and the gun king puzzled over that for an instant, so that their second shots came at the same time.

Sheldon was still on his feet and Longut scowled and ripped off the four remaining shots faster than a man could flick his eye. Sheldon stood there like the stolid townsman that he was, shooting with spaced care but with never one of his shots even whining by.

Then the two of them just stood staring, until Longut cursed angrily, "What the hell . . ." and broke out his empties to examine them. Then out of raw anger, he lifted his deep-chested mirth to the skies.

He swung on one heel and grinned at Coyote, "Smart as I named you, ain'tcha? All right, Coyote, you saved one man's life and another's pride, and you do that all through life, boy, you'll never need more than blanks in your own gun. But don't forget the gun savvy that I taught you!"

The kid couldn't answer for there was a big hot lump down in his throat as the gun king swung up into leather, for he knew that here was somebody wild and reckless and dangerous as the spring storms who still loved him like a father, and now was riding out of his life.

But he lifted a hand and wigwagged and managed a shrill "So long, pardner!"

Longut's wigwag and deep laugh came back. "You mind that you and your next pa are the only men living ever stood up to Longut Blaine and bested him, Coyote!" and then he gave his primitive savage trail call and put his pony drumming for the open prairie.

Burt was standing beside him with a proud smile in his eye, and the runt turned and buried his head against his side, and then unabashed, he cried.

Read These 5 Great Western Novels!

TRAIL TO TAOS by LARRY A. HARRIS

KNIGHT OF THE SILVER STAR by BRADFORD SCOTT

EXILED GUNS by L. P. HOLMES

GUN SLINGIN' MAVERICK by LEE BOND

HANGMAN'S PAY by DON ALVISO

They're All in the Gala February Issue of FIVE WESTERN NOVELS, Now on Sale at All Newsstands—25c Per Copy!

A Book Bargain ROUNDUP

by TEX MUMFORD

IT'S winter again, rannies! Shore nice to curl up with a good book and read about the days when the sun is shining on the gramma grass and you can spot a red cow forty mile off across the prairie. We've culled out a whole new crop of fine spanking new books for you—every one a thoroughbred, now available in 25c reprint editions. Have a look, they're top values for two bits a head!

TRAIL OF THE MACAW by Eugene Cunningham

A steady diet of trouble and gunsmoke was enough to give any man indigestion except a rawhide tough ranny like Morg Connor, who thrived on it. Even the reputation of a power-hungry boss gunman like Castro didn't scare Connor. When Castro killed his best friend Connor hit the vengeance trail south of the border. An Indian named Macaw met and warned him in friendly fashion to head north for Texas, for Castro was poison. Morgan thanked him for the advice and rode south. It brought him a bushwhack bullet and then a lynching bee with himself as chief attraction. But the mysterious Indian, Macaw, came surprisingly to help, revealing that he had good reason to hate Castro himself. And white man and red joined their guns in a flaming partnership to blast fear into Castro's hell-spawned crew.

This one's a rip-snorter.

●

THE RING-TAILED RANNYHANS by Walt Coburn

Calamity was his name and calamity was his hobby. With his partner, Hurricane Smith, he pitched in to save the Rocking Chair Ranch for its inexperienced, tenderfoot owner. They took out after rustlers who were bleeding the ranch dry and in their usual style, brought back a thousand stolen cattle.

But an ambusher's bullet set Calamity afoot and an attempt to take a horse from a stranger led to more of his nickname—Calamity. Hurricane Smith went berserk when his partner's horse showed up, saddle empty and smeared with blood. Like his own namesake, Hurricane roared into action, charging to rescue or avenge his friend and to match shots with the most murderous killer who ever cast a blot on the landscape.

Walt Coburn is unmatched for his creation of real Western people and for the breath-taking drama packed into his stories. Only a Westerner could write a book that packs so much conviction in every line.

SHOTGUN GOLD by W. C. Tuttle

One of the famous Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens stories—a series beloved of every Western reader. Hashknife and Sleepy ran smack into a grim and deadly feud when they blew into the little town of Turquoise.

The feud was an ancient and slumbering one between the Morans and the Conleys. But Jim Moran was in love with Dawn, Moses Conley's half-caste daughter. And he meant to have her even if it reawakened the feud.

Then eight Moran steers were found dead on Conley's range. Conley boiled over at the accusation that he had killed the steers and swore he'd shoot the first man who came snooping around. A few hours later Conley was dry-gulched and killed. The people of Turquoise accused Jim Moran of the murder.

Then Hashknife and Sleepy arrived. And with the cool head and unhurried way they had of looking beneath the surface, and of seeing things in just a little different light than ordinary folks, they got their own ideas about who had killed Conley. And that led to some surprises and to a lot of roaring guns and leaden messengers of death. Don't overlook this one.

●

GUNS OF MIST RIVER by Jackson Cole

One Ranger—one riot. That's the way Jim Hatfield, ace of the Texas Rangers operated. He was a terror with twin guns or with lightning fast, rock hard fists. And there was a keen and calculating mind back of the icy green eyes that missed nothing and understood most of what he saw. All of which equipment he needed when he was sent down to stop the war between the Bradded R Ranch and the Forked S outfit in Mist River. This was a dirty war. A puncher on each side had been caught and hanged by the opposition. Then a herd of Bradded R cattle was drowned.

When Hatfield entered the scene he was promptly bushwhacked. Then an attempt was made to burn him alive. But—well, get the book and see how a tough Texas Ranger operates!

Something struck Ring on the head as he tried to rise

by Jim Mayo

Four Card DRAW

Allen Ring knew the dead man's tally book meant a range war, and he kept score with gunsmoke!

WHEN a man drew four cards he could expect something like this to happen. Ben Taylor had probably been right when he told him his luck had run out. Despite that, he had a place of his own, and come what may, he was going to keep it.

Nor was there any fault to find with the place. From the moment Allen Ring rode his claybank into the valley he knew he was coming home. This was it, this was the place. Here he would stop. He'd been tumbleweeding all over the West now for ten years, and it was

time he stopped if he ever did, and this looked like his fence corner.

Even the cabin looked good, although Taylor told him the place had been empty for three years. It looked solid and fit, and while the grass was waist high all over the valley, and up around the house, he could see trails through it, some of them made by unshod ponies, which mean wild horses, and some by deer. Then there were the tracks of a single shod horse, always the same one.

Those tracks always led right up to the door, and they stopped there, yet he could see that somebody with mighty small feet had been walking up to peer into the windows. Why would a person want to look into a window more than once? The window of an empty cabin? He had gone up and looked in himself, and all he saw was a dusty, dark interior with a ray of light from the opposite window, a table, a couple of chairs, and a fine old fireplace that had been built by skilled hands.

"You never built that fireplace, Ben Taylor," Ring had muttered, "you who never could handle anything but a running iron or a deck of cards. You never built anything in your life as fine and useful as that."

The cabin sat on a low ledge of grass backed up against the towering cliff of red rock, and the spring was not more than fifty feet away, a stream that came out of the rock and trickled pleasantly into a small basin before spilling out and winding thoughtfully down the valley to join a larger stream, a quarter of a mile away.

There were some tall spruces around the cabin, a couple of sycamores and a cottonwood near the spring. Some gooseberry bushes, too, and a couple of apple trees. The trees had been pruned.

"And you never did that, either, Ben Taylor!" Allen Ring said soberly. "I wish I knew more about this place."

Time had fled like a scared antelope, and with the scythe he found in the pole barn he cut off the tall grass around the house, patched up the holes in the cabin where the pack rats had got in, and even thinned out the bushes—it had been several years since they had been touched—and repaired the pole barn.

THE day he picked to clean out the spring was the day Gail Truman rode up to the house. He had been putting the finishing touches on a chair bottom he was making when he heard a horse's hoof strike stone, and he straightened up to see the girl sitting on the red pony. She was staring open mouthed at the stacked hay from the grass he had cut, and the washed windows of the house. He saw her swing down and run up to the window, and dropping his tools he strolled up.

"Huntin' somebody, Ma'am?"

She wheeled and stared at him, her wide blue eyes accusing. "What are you doing here?" she demanded. "What do you mean by moving in like this?"

He smiled, but he was puzzled, too. Ben Taylor had said nothing about a girl, especially a girl like this. "Why, I own the place!" he said. "I'm fixin' it up so's I can live here."

"You own it?" Her voice was incredulous, agonized. "You couldn't own it! You couldn't. The man who owns this place is gone, and he would never sell it! Never!"

"He didn't exactly sell it, Ma'am," Ring said gently, "he lost it to me in a poker game. That was down Texas way."

She was horrified. "In a poker game? Whit Bayly in a poker game? I don't believe it!"

"The man I won it from was called Ben Taylor, Ma'am." Ring took the deed from his pocket and opened it. "Come to think of it, Ben did say that if anybody asked about Whit Bayly to say that he died down in the Guadaloupes—of lead poisoning."

"Whit Bayly is dead?" The girl looked stunned. "You're sure? Oh!"

Her face went white and still and something in it seemed to die. She turned with a little gesture of despair and stared out across the valley, and his eyes followed hers. It was strange, Allen Ring told himself, that it was the first time he had looked just that way, and

he stood there, caught up by something nameless, some haunting sense of the familiar.

Before him lay the tall grass of the valley, turning slightly now with the brown of autumn, and to his right a dark stand of spruce, standing stiffly, like soldiers on parade, and beyond them the swell of the hill, and further to the right the hill rolled up and stopped, and beyond lay a wider valley fading away into the vast purple and mauve of distance, and here and there spotted with the golden candles of cottonwoods, their leaves bright yellow with nearing cold.

There was no word for this, it was a picture, yet a picture of which a man could only dream and never reproduce.

"It—it's beautiful, isn't it?" he said.

She turned on him, and for the first time she seemed really to look at him, a tall young man with a shock of rust brown hair and sombre gray eyes, having about him the look of a rider and a look of a lonely man.

"Yes, it is beautiful. Oh, I've come here so many times to see it, the cabin, too. I think this is the most lovely place I have ever seen. I used to dream about—" She stopped, suddenly confused. "Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk so."

She looked at him soberly "I'd better go. I guess this is yours now."

He hesitated. "Ma'am," he said sincerely, "the place is mine, and sure enough, I love it. I wouldn't swap this place for anything. But that view, that belongs to no man. It belongs to whoever looks at it with eyes to see it, so you come any time you like, and look all you please."

Ring grinned. "Fact is," he said, "I'm aimin' to fix the place up inside, an' I'm sure no hand at such things. Maybe you could sort of help me. I'd like it kind of homey like." He flushed. "You see, I sort of lived in bunkhouses all my life, an' never had no such place."

SHE smiled with a quick understanding and sympathy. "Of course! I'd love to, only—" her face sobered, "you won't be able to stay here. You haven't seen Ross Bilton yet, have you?"

"Who's he?" Ring asked, curiously. He nodded toward the horsemen he saw approaching. "Is this the one?"

She turned quickly, and nodded. "Be careful! He's the town marshal. The men with him are Ben Hagen and Stan Brule."

Brule he remembered—but would Brule remember him?

"By the way, my name is Allen Ring," he said, low voiced.

"I'm Gail Truman. My father owns the Tall T brand."

Bilton was a big man with a white hat. Ring decided he didn't like him and that the feeling was going to be mutual. Brule he knew, so the stocky man was Ben Hagen. Brule had changed but little, some thinner, maybe, but his hatchet face as lean and poisonous as always.

"How are you, Gail?" Bilton said briefly. "Is this a friend of yours?"

Allen Ring liked to get his cards on the table. "Yes, a friend of hers, but also the owner of the place."

"You own Red Rock?" Bilton was incredulous. "That will be very hard to prove, my friend. Also, this place is under the custody of the law."

"Whose law?" Ring wanted to know. He was aware that Brule was watching him, wary but uncertain as yet.

"Mine. I'm the town marshal. There was a murder committed here, and until that murder is solved and the killer brought to justice this place will not be touched. You have already seen fit to make changes, but perhaps the court will be lenient."

"You're the town marshal?" Allen Ring shoved his hat back on his head and reached for his tobacco. "That's mighty interestin'. Howsoever, let me remind you that you're out of town right now."

"That makes no difference!" Bilton's voice was sharp. Ring could see that he was not accustomed to being told off. That his orders were usually obeyed. "You will get off this place before nightfall!"

"It makes a sight of difference to me,"

Allen replied calmly. "I bought this place by stakin' everything I had against it in a poker game. I drew four cards to win, a nine to match one I had, and three aces. It was a fool play that paid off. I registered the deed. She's mine legal. I know of no law that allows a place to be kept idle because there was a murder committed on it. If after three years it hasn't been solved, I suggest the town get a new marshal."

Ross Bilton was angry, but he kept himself under control. "I've warned you, and you've been told to leave. If you do not leave, I'll use my authority to move you."

Ring smiled. "Now listen, Bilton! You might pull that stuff on some folks that don't like trouble! You might bluff somebody into believin' you had the authority to do this. You don't bluff me, an' I simply don't scare—do I Brule?"

He turned on Brule so sharply that the man stiffened in his saddle, his hand poised as though to grab for a gun. The breed's face stiffened with irritation, and then recognition came to him. "Allen Ring!" he said. "You again!"

"That's right, Brule. Only this time I'm not takin' cattle through the Indian Nation. Not pushin' them by that ratty bunch of rustlers an' highbinders you rode with." Ring turned his eyes toward Bilton. "You're the law? An' you ride with *him?* Why, the man's wanted in ever' county in Texas for everythin' from murder to horse thievin'."

Ross Bilton stared at Ring for a long minute. "You've been warned," he said.

"An' I'm stayin'," Ring replied sharply. "And keep your coyotes away, if you come again. I don't like 'em!"

BRULE'S fingers spread and his lips stiffened with cold fury. Ring watched him calmly. "You know better than that, Brule. Wait until my back is turned. If you reach for a gun I'll blow you out of your saddle."

Stan Brule slowly relaxed his hand, and then wordless, he turned to follow Bilton and Hagen, who had watched with hard eyes.

Gail Truman was looking at him curiously. "Why, Brule was afraid of you!" she exclaimed. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Nobody, Ma'am," he said simply. "I'm no gunfighter, just an hombre who ain't got brains enough to scare proper. Brule knows it. He knows he might beat me, but he knows I'd kill him. He was there when I killed a friend of his, Blaze Garden."

"But—but then you must be a gunman. Blaze Garden was a killer! I've heard Dad and the boys talk about him!"

"No, I'm no gunman. Blaze beat me to the draw. In fact, he got off his first shot before my gun cleared the holster. only he shot too quick and missed. His second and third shots hit me while I was walkin' into him. The third shot wasn't so bad because I was holdin' my fire and gettin' close. He got scared an' stepped back and the third shot was too high. Then I shot and I was close up to him then. One was enough. One is always enough if you place it right."

He gestured at the place. "What's this all about? Mind tellin' me?"

"It's very simple, really. Nothing out here is very involved when you come to that. It seems that there's something out here that brings men to using guns much faster than in other places, and one thing stems from another.

"Whit Bayly owned this place. He was a fixing man, always tinkering and fixing things up. He was a tall, handsome man whom all the girls loved—"

"You, too?" he asked quizzically.

She flushed. "Yes, I guess so, only I'm only eighteen now, and that was three, almost four years ago. I wasn't very pretty, or very noticeable and much too young.

"Sam Hazlitt was one of the richest men in the country around here, and Whit had a run-in with him over a horse. There had been a lot of stealing going on around, and Hazlitt traced some stock of his to this ranch, or so he claimed. Anyway, he accused Bayly of it, and Whit told him not to talk foolish. Furthermore, he told Hazlitt to stay off of his ranch. Well, folks were divided over who was in the right, but Whit had

a lot of friends and Hazlitt had four brothers and clannish as all get out.

"Not long after some riders from Buck Hazlitt's ranch came by that way and saw a body lying in the yard, right over near the spring. When they came down to have a look, thinking Whit was hurt, they found Sam Hazlitt, and he'd been shot dead—in the back.

"They headed right for town, hunting Whit, and they found him. He denied it, and they were goin' to hang him, had a rope around his neck, and then I—I—well, I swore he wasn't anywhere near his ranch all day."

"It wasn't true?" Ring asked keenly, his eyes searching the girl's face. She avoided his eyes, flushing even more.

"Not—not exactly. But I knew he wasn't guilty! I just knew he wouldn't shoot a man in the back! I told them he was over to our place, talking with me, and he hadn't time to get back there and kill Sam.

"Folks didn't like it much. Some of them still believed he killed Sam, and some didn't like it because despite the way I said it, they figured he was sparking a girl too young for him. I always said it wasn't that. As a matter of fact, I did see Whit over our way, but the rest of it was lies. Anyway, after a few weeks Whit up and left the country."

"I see—and nobody knows yet who killed Sam Hazlitt?"

"Nobody. One thing that was never understood was what became of Sam's account book—sort of a tally book, but more than that. It was a sort of record he kept of a lot of things, and it was gone out of his pocket. Nobody ever found it, but they did find the pencil Sam used on the sand nearby. Dad always figured Sam lived long enough to write something, but that the killer stole the book and destroyed it."

"How about the hands? Could they have picked it up? Did Bilton question them about that?"

"Oh, Bilton wasn't marshal then! In fact, he was riding for Buck Hazlitt then! He was one of the hands who found Sam's body!"

AFTER the girl had gone Allen Ring walked back to the house and thought the matter over. He had no intention of leaving. This was just the ranch he wanted, and he intended to live right here, yet the problem fascinated him.

Living in the house and looking around the place had taught him a good deal about Whit Bayly. He was, as Gail had said, "a fixin' man," for there were many marks of his handiwork aside from the beautifully made fireplace and the pruned apple trees. He was, Ring was willing to gamble, no murderer.

Taylor had said he died of lead poisoning. Who had killed Bayly? Why? Was it a casual shooting over some rangeland argument, or had he been followed from here by someone on vengeance bent? Or someone who thought he might know too much?

"You'll like the place." Taylor had said—that was an angle he hadn't considered before. Ben Taylor had actually seen this place himself! The more sign he read, the more tricky the trail became, and Allen walked outside and sat down against the cabin wall when his supper was finished, and lighted a smoke.

Stock had been followed to the ranch by Sam Hazlitt. If Whit was not the thief, then who was? Where had the stock been driven? He turned his eyes almost automatically toward the Mogollons, the logical place. His eyes narrowed, and he recalled that one night while playing cards they had been talking of springs and waterholes, and Ben Taylor had talked about Fossil Springs, a huge spring that roared thousands of gallons of water out of the earth.

"Place a man could run plenty of stock," he had said and winked, "and nobody the wiser!"

Those words had been spoken far away and long ago, and the Red Rock ranch had not yet been put on the table; that was months later. There was, he recalled, a Fossil Creek somewhere north of here. And Fossil Creek might

flow from Fossil Springs—perhaps Ben Taylor had talked more to effect than he knew. That had been Texas, and this was Arizona, and a casual bunkhouse conversation probably seemed harmless enough.

"We'll see, Ben!" Ring muttered grimly. "We'll see!"

Ross Bilton had been one of the Hazlitt hands at the time of the killing, one of the first on the scene. Now he was town marshal but interested in keeping the ranch unoccupied—why?

None of it made sense, yet actually it was no business of his. Allen Ring thought that over, and decided it was his business in a sense. He now owned the place, and lived on it. If an old murder was to interfere with his living there, it behooved him to know the facts. It was a slight excuse for his curiosity.

Morning came and the day drew on toward noon, and there was no sign of Bilton or Brule. Ring had loaded his rifle and kept it close to hand, and he was wearing two guns, thinking he might need a loaded spare, although he rarely wore more than one. Also, inside the cabin door he had his double barreled shotgun.

The spring drew his attention. At the moment he did not wish to leave the vicinity of the cabin, and that meant a good time to clean out the spring. Not that it needed it, but there were loose stones in the bottom of the basin, and some moss. With this removed he would have more water and clearer water. With a wary eye toward the canyon mouth, he began his work.

THE sound of an approaching horse drew him erect. His rifle stood against the rocks at hand, and his guns were ready, yet as the rider came into sight, he saw there was only one man, and a stranger.

He rode a fine bay gelding and he was not a young man, but thick and heavy with drooping mustache and kind blue eyes. He drew up.

"Howdy!" he said affably, yet taking a quick glance around before looking again at Ring. "I'm Rolly Truman, Gail's father."

"It's a pleasure," Ring said, wiping his wet hands on a red bandana. "Nice to know the neighbors." He nodded at the spring. "I picked me a job. That hole's deeper than it looks!"

"Good flow of water," Truman agreed. He chewed his mustache thoughtfully. "I like to see a young man with get up about him, startin' his own spread, willin' to work."

Allen Ring waited. The man was building up to something; what, he knew not. It came then, carefully at first, yet shaping a loop as it drew near.

"Not much range here, of course," Truman added, "you should have more graze. Ever been over in Cedar Basin? Or up along the East Verde bottom? Wonderful land up there, still some wild, but a country where a man could really do something with a few whiteface cattle."

"No, I haven't seen it," Ring replied, "but I'm satisfied. I'm not land hungry. All I want is a small place, an' this suits me fine."

Truman shifted in his saddle and looked uncomfortable. "Fact is, Son, you're upsettin' a lot of folks by bein' here. What you should do is to move."

"I'm sorry," Ring said flatly, "I don't want to make enemies, but I won this place on a four card draw. Maybe I'm a fatalist, but somehow or other, I think I should stick here. No man's got a right to think he can draw four cards and win anythin', but I did, an' in a plenty rough game. I had everythin' I owned in that pot. Now I got the place."

The rancher sat his horse uneasily. then he shook his head. "Son, you've sure got to move! There's nc trouble here now, and if you stay she's liable to open old sores, start more trouble than any of us can stop. Besides, how did Ben Taylor get title to this place? Bayly had no love for him. I doubt if your title will stand up in court."

"As to that I don't know." Ring persisted stubbornly, "I have a deed

that's legal enough, and I've registered that deed, an' my brand along with it. I did find out that Bayly had no heirs. So I reckon I'll sit tight until somebody comes along with a better legal claim than mine."

Truman ran his hand over his brow. "Well, I guess I don't blame you much, Son. Maybe I shouldn't have come over, but I know Ross Bilton and his crowd, and I reckon I wanted to save myself some trouble as well as you. Gail, she thinks you're a fine young man. In fact, you're the first man she's ever showed interest in since Whit left, and she was a youngster then. It was a sort of hero worship she had for him. I don't want trouble."

Allen Ring leaned on the shovel and looked up at the older man. "Truman," he said, "are you sure you aren't buyin' trouble by tryin' to avoid it? Just what's your stake in this?"

The rancher sat very still, his face drawn and pale. Then he got down from his horse and sat on a rock. Removing his hat, he mopped his brow.

"Son," he said slowly, "I reckon I got to trust you. You've heard of the Hazlitts. They are a hard, clannish bunch, men who lived by the gun most of their lives. Sam was murdered. Folks all know that when they find out who murdered him and why, there's goin' to be plenty of trouble around here. Plenty."

"Did you kill him?"

Truman jerked his head up. "No! No, you mustn't get that idea, but—well, you know how small ranchers are. There was a sight of rustlin' them days, and the Hazlitts were the big outfit. They lost cows."

"And some of them got your brand?" Ring asked shrewdly.

Truman nodded. "I reckon. Not so many, though. And not only me. Don't get me wrong, I'm not beggin' off the blame. Part of it is mine, all right, but I didn't get many. Eight or ten of us hereabouts slapped brands on Hazlitt stock—and at least five of us have the biggest brands around here now, some as big almost as the Hazlitts."

ALLEN RING studied the skyline thoughtfully. It was an old story and one often repeated in the west. When the War Between the States ended, men came home to Texas, and the southwest to find cattle running in thousands, unbranded, and unowned. The first man to slap on a brand was the owner, and no way he could be contested.

Many men grew rich with nothing more than a wide loop and a running iron. Then the unbranded cattle were gone, the ranches had settled into going concerns, and the great days of casual branding had ended, yet there was still free range, and a man with that same loop and running iron could still build a herd fast.

More than one of the biggest ranchers had begun that way, and many of them continued to brand loose stock wherever found. No doubt that had been true here, and these men like Rolly Truman, good, able men who had fought Indians and built their homes to last, had begun just that way. Now the range was mostly fenced, ranches had narrowed somewhat, but Ring could see what it might mean to open an old sore now.

Sam Hazlitt had been trailing rustlers—he had found out who they were, and where the herds were taken, and he had been shot down from behind. The catch was that the tally book, with his records, was still missing. That tally book might contain evidence as to the rustling done by men who were now pillars of the community, and open them to the vengeance of the Hazlitt outfit.

Often western men threw a blanket over a situation. If a rustler had killed Sam, then all the rustlers involved would be equally guilty. Anyone who lived on this ranch might stumble on that tally book and throw the range into a bloody gun war in which many men now beyond the errors of their youth, with homes, families, and different customs, would die.

It could serve no purpose to blow the lid off the trouble now, yet Allen Ring had a hunch. In their fear of trouble for themselves they might be

concealing an even greater crime, aiding a murderer in his escape. There were lines of care in the face of Rolly Truman that a settled, established rancher should not have.

"Sorry," Ring said, "I'm stayin'. I like this place."

All through the noon hour the tension was building. The air was warm and sultry, and there was a thickening haze over the mountains. There was that hot, thickness in the air that presaged a storm. Yet when he left his coffee to return to work, Ring saw three horsemen coming into the canyon mouth at a running walk. He stopped in the door and touched his lips with his tongue.

They reined up at the door, three hard-bitten, hard-eyed men with rifles across their saddle bows. Men with guns in their holsters and men of a kind that would never turn from trouble. These were men with the bark on, lean fanatics with lips thinned with old bitterness.

The older man spoke first. "Ring, I've heard about you. I'm Buck Hazlitt. These are my brothers, Joe and Dolph. There's talk around that you aim to stay on this place. There's been talk for years that Sam hid his tally book here. We figure the killer got that book and burned it. Maybe he did, and again, maybe not. We want that book. If you want to stay on this place, you stay. But if you find that book, you bring it to us."

RING looked from one to the other, and he could see the picture clearly. With men like these, hard and unforgiving, it was no wonder Rolly Truman and the other ranchers were worried. The years and prosperity had eased Rolly and his like into comfort and softness, but not there. The Hazlitts were of feudal blood and background.

"Hazlitt," Ring said, "I know how you feel. You lost a brother, and that means somethin', but if that book is still around, which I doubt, and I find it, I'll decide what to do with it all by myself. I don't aim to start a range war. Maybe there's some things best forgotten. The man who murdered Sam Hazlitt ought to pay."

"We'll handle that" Dolph put in grimly. "You find that book, you bring it to us. If you don't—" His eyes hardened. "Well, we'd have to class you with the crooks."

Ring's eyes shifted to Dolph. "Class, if you want," he flared. "I'll do what seems best to me with that book. But all of you folks are plumb proddy over that tally book. Chances are nine out of ten the killer found it and destroyed it."

"I don't reckon he did," Buck said coldly, "because we know he's been back here, a-huntin' it. Him an' his girl."

Ring stiffened. "You mean—?"

"What we mean is our figger, not yours." Buck Hazlitt reined his horse around. "You been told. You bring that book to us. You try to buck the Hazlitts and you won't stay in this country."

Ring had his back up. Despite himself he felt cold anger mounting within him. "Put this in your pipe, friend." he said harshly, "I came here to stay. No Hazlitt will change that. I ain't huntin' trouble but if you bring trouble to me, I'll handle it. I can bury a Hazlitt as easy as any other man!"

Not one of them condescended to notice the remark. Turning their horses they walked them down the canyon and out of it into the sultry afternoon. Allen Ring mopped the sweat from his face, and listened to the deep rumbling of far off thunder, growling among the canyons like a grizzly with a toothache. It was going to rain. Sure as shootin', it was going to rain—a regular gully washer.

There was yet time to finish the job on the spring, so he picked up his shovel and started back for the job. The rock basin was nearly cleaned and he finished removing the few rocks and the moss that had gathered. Then he opened the escape channel a little more to insure a more rapid emptying and filling process in the basin into which the trickle of water fell.

The water emerged from a crack in the rocks and trickled into the basin and finishing his job, Ring glanced thoughtfully to see if anything remained undone. There was still some moss on the rocks from which the water flowed, and kneeling down, he leaned over to scrape it away and pulling away the last shreds, he noticed a space from which a rock had recently fallen. Pulling more moss away, he dislodged another rock, and there, pushed into a niche, was a small black book!

Sam Hazlitt, dying, had evidently managed to shove it back in this crack in the rocks, hoping it would be found by someone not the killer.

Sitting back on his haunches, Ring opened the faded, canvas bound book. A flap crossed over the page ends and the book had been closed by a small tongue that slid into a loop of the canvas cover. Opening the book, he saw the pages were stained, but still legible.

The next instant he was struck by lightning. At least, that was what seemed to happen. Thunder crashed, and something struck him on the skull and he tried to rise and something struck again. He felt a drop of rain on his face and his eyes opened wide and then another blow caught him and he faded out into darkness, his fingers clawing at the grass to keep from slipping down into that velvety, smothering blackness.

HE was wet. He turned a little, lying there, thinking he must have left a window open and the rain was—his eyes opened and he felt rain pounding on his face and he stared, not at a boot with a California spur, but at dead brown grass, soaked with rain now, and the glistening smoothness of water-worn stones. He was soaked to the hide.

Struggling to his knees, he looked around, his head heavy, his lips and tongue thick. He blinked at a gray, rain slanted world and at low gray clouds and a distant rumble of thunder following a streak of lightning along the mountain tops.

Lurching to his feet, he stumbled toward the cabin and pitched over the door sill to the floor. Struggling again to his feet he got the door closed and in a vague, misty half world of consciousness he struggled out of his clothes and got his hands on a rough towel and fumblingly dried himself.

He did not think. He was acting purely from vague instinctive realization of what he must do. He dressed again, in dry clothes and dropped at the table. After awhile he sat up and it was dark and he knew he had blacked out again. He lighted a light and nearly dropped it to the floor, then stumbled to the wash basin and splashed his face with cold water. Then he bathed his scalp, feeling tenderly of the lacerations there.

A boot with a California spur.

That was all he had seen. The tally book was gone, and a man wearing a new boot with a California type spur, a large rowel, had taken it. He got coffee on, and while he waited for it he took his guns out and dried them painstakingly, wiping off each shell, then replacing them in his belt with other shells from a box on a shelf.

He reloaded the guns, then slipping into his slicker he went outside for his rifle. Between sips of coffee, he worked over his rifle until he was satisfied, then threw a small pack together, and stuffed his slicker pockets with shotgun shells.

The shotgun was an express gun and short barreled. He slung it from a loop under the slicker. Then he took a lantern and went to the stable and saddled the claybank. Leading the horse outside into the driving rain, he swung into the saddle and turned along the road toward Basin.

There was no letup in the rain. It fell steadily and heavily, yet the claybank slogged along, alternating between a shambling trot and a fast walk. Allen Ring, his chin sunk in the upturned collar of his slicker watched the drops fall from the brim of his Stetson and felt the bump of the shotgun under his coat.

He had seen little of the tally book, but sufficient to know that it would blow the lid off the very range war they were fearing. Knowing the Hazlitts, he knew they would bring fire and gunplay to every home even remotely connected with the death of their brother.

THE horse slid down a steep bank and shambled across the wide wash. Suddenly, the distant roar that had been in his ears for some time sprang into consciousness and he jerked his head up. His horse snorted in alarm, and Ring stared, open mouthed at the wall of water, towering all of ten feet high, that was rolling down the wash toward him.

With a shrill rebel yell he slapped the spurs to the claybank and the startled horse turned loose with an astounded leap and hit the ground in a dead run. There was no time to slow for the bank of the wash and the horse went up, slipped at the very brink and started to fall back.

Ring hit the ground with both boots, scrambled over the brink, and even as the flood roared down upon them, he heaved on the bridle and the horse cleared the edge and stood trembling. Swearing softly, Ring kicked the mud from his boots and mounted again. Leaving the raging torrent behind him he rode on.

Thick blackness of night and heavy clouds lay upon the town when he sloped down the main street and headed the horse toward the barn. He swung down, handed the bridle to the handy man.

"Rub him down," he said. "I'll be back."

He started for the doors, then stopped, staring at the three horses in neighboring stalls. The liveryman noticed his glance, and looked at him.

"The Hazlitts. They come in about an hour ago, ugly as sin."

Allen Ring stood wide legged, staring grimly out the door. There was a coolness inside him now that he recognized. He dried his hands carefully.

"Bilton in town?" he asked.

"Sure is. Playin' cards over to the Mazatzal Saloon."

"He wear Mex spurs? Big rowels?"

The man rubbed his jaw. "I don't remember. I don't know at all. You watch out," he warned, "folks are on the prod."

Ring stepped out into the street and slogged through the mud to the edge of the boardwalk before the darkened general store. He kicked the mud from his boots and dried his hands again. after carefully unbuttoning his slicker.

Nobody would have a second chance after this. He knew well enough that his walking into the Mazatzal would precipitate an explosion. Only, he wanted to light the fuse himself, in his own way.

He stood there in the darkness alone, thinking it over. They would all be there. It would be like tossing a match into a lot of fused dynamite. He wished then that he was a better man with a gun than he was, or that he had someone to side him in this, but he had always acted alone and would scarcely know how to act with anyone else.

He walked along the boardwalk with long strides, his boots making hard sounds under the steady roar of the rain. He couldn't place that spur, that boot. Yet he had to. He had to get his hands on that book.

Four horses stood, heads down in the rain, saddles covered with slickers. He looked at them, and saw they were of three different brands. The window of the Mazatzal was rain wet, yet standing at one side he glanced within.

The long room was crowded and smoky. Men lined the bar, feet on the brass rail. A dozen tables were crowded with card players. Everyone seemed to has taken refuge here from the rain. Picking out the Hazlitt boys, Allen saw them gathered together at the back end of the room. Then he got Ross Bilton pegged. He was at a table playing cards. facing the door. Stan Brule was at this end of the bar, and Hagen was at a table against the wall, the three of them making three points of a flat triangle whose base was the door.

IT WAS no accident. Bilton then, expected trouble, and he was not looking toward the Hazlitts. Yet, on reflection, Ring could see the triangle could center fire from three directions on the Hazlitts as well. There was a man with his back to the door who sat in the game with Bilton. And not far from Hagen, Rolly Truman was at the bar.

Truman was toying with his drink, just killing time. Everybody seemed to be waiting for something.

Could it be he they waited upon? No, that was scarcely to be considered. They could not know he had found the book, although it was certain at least one man in the room knew, and possibly others. Maybe it was just the tension, the building up of feeling over his taking over of the place at Red Rock. Allen Ring carefully turned down the collar of his slicker and wiped his hands dry again.

He felt jumpy, and could feel that dryness in his mouth that always came on him at times like this. He touched his gun butts, then stepped over and opened the door.

Everyone looked up or around at once. Ross Bilton held a card aloft and his hand froze in the act of dealing, holding still for a full ten seconds while Ring closed the door. He surveyed the room again, saw Ross play the card and say something in an undertone to the man opposite him. The man turned his head slightly and it was Ben Taylor!

The gambler looked around, his face coldly curious, and for an instant their eyes met across the room, and then Allen Ring started toward him.

There was no other sound in the room, although they could all hear the unceasing roar of the rain of the roof. Ring saw something leap up in Taylor's eyes and his own took on a sardonic glint.

"That was a good hand you dealt me down Texas way," Ring said. "A good hand!"

"You'd better draw more cards," Taylor said, "you're holdin' a small pair!"

Ring's eyes shifted as the man turned slightly. It was the jingle of his spurs that drew his eyes, and there they were, the large rowelled California style spurs, not common here. He stopped beside Taylor so the man had to tilt his head back to look up. Ring was acutely conscious that he was now centered between the fire of Brule and Hagen. The Hazlitts looked on curiously, uncertain as to what was happening.

"Give it to me, Taylor," Ring said quietly, "give it to me now."

There was ice in his voice, and Taylor, aware of the awkwardness of his position, got to his feet, inches away from Ring.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he flared.

"No?"

Ring was standing with his feet apart a little, and his hands were breast high, one of them clutching the edge of his raincoat. He hooked with his left from that position, and the blow was too short, too sudden, and too fast for Ben Taylor.

The crack of it on the angle of his jaw was audible, and then Ring's right came up in the gambler's solar plexus and the man's knees sagged. Spinning him around, Ring ripped open his coat with a jerk that scattered buttons across the room, then from an inside pocket he jerked the tally book.

He saw the Hazlitts start at the same instant that Bilton sprang back from the chair, upseting it.

"Get him!" Bilton roared. "Get him!"

Ring shoved Taylor hard into the table, upsetting it and causing Bilton to spring back to keep his balance, and at the same instant, Ring dropped to a half crouch and turning left he drew with a flash of speed, saw Brule's gun come up at almost the same instant, and then he fired!

STAN BRULE was caught with his gun just level and the bullet smashed him on the jaw. The tall man staggered, his face a mask of hatred and astonishment mingled, and then Ring fired again, did a quick spring around with his knees bent, turning completely

around in one leap, and firing as his feet hit the floor. He felt Hagen's bullet smash into him, and he tottered, then fired coolly, and swinging as he fired, he caught Bilton right over the belt buckle.

It was fast action, snapping, quick, yet deliberate. The four fired shots had taken less than three seconds.

Stepping back, he scooped the tally book from the floor where it had dropped, then pocketed it. Bilton was on the floor, coughing blood. Hagen had a broken right arm and was swearing in a thick, stunned voice.

Stan Brule had drawn his last gun. He had been dead before he hit the floor. The Hazlitts started forward with a lunge, and Allen Ring took another step backward, dropping his pistol and swinging the shotgun, still hanging from his shoulder, into firing position.

"Get back!" he said thickly. "Get back or I'll kill the three of you! Back—back to where you stood!"

Their faces wolfish, the three stood lean and dangerous, yet the shotgun brooked no refusal and slowly, bitterly and reluctantly, the three moved back, step by step.

Ring motioned with the shotgun. "All of you—along the wall!"

The men rose and moved back, their eyes on him, uncertain, wary, some of them frightened.

Allen Ring watched them go, feeling curiously light-headed and uncertain. He tried to frown away the pain from his throbbing skull, yet there was a pervading weakness from somewhere else.

"My gosh!" Rolly Truman said. "The man's been shot! He's bleeding!"

"Get back!" Ring said thickly.

His eyes shifted to the glowing pot bellied stove, and he moved forward, the shotgun waist high, his eyes on the men who stared at him, awed.

The sling held the gun level, his hand partly supporting it, a finger on the trigger. With his left hand he opened the stove, then fumbled in his pocket.

Buck Hazlitt's eyes bulged. "No!" he roared "No, you don't!"

He lunged forward, and Ring tipped the shotgun and fired a blast into the floor, inches ahead of Hazlitt's feet. The rancher stopped so suddenly he almost fell, the shotgun tipped to cover him.

"Back!" Ring said. He swayed on his feet. "Back!" He fished out the tally book and threw it into the flames.

Something like a sigh went through the crowd. They stared, awed as the names seized hungrily at the opened book, curling around the leaves with hot fingers, turning them brown, then black and to ashes.

Half hypnotized the crowd watched, then Ring's eyes swung to Hazlitt. "It was Ben Taylor killed him," he muttered. "Taylor, an' Bilton was with him. He—he seen it."

"We take your word for it?" Buck Hazlitt demanded furiously.

Allen Ring's eyes widened and he seemed to gather himself. "You want to question it? You want to call me a liar?"

Hazlitt looked at him, touching his tongue to his lips. "No," he said, "I figured it was them."

"I told you true," Ring said, and then his legs seemed to fold up under him and he went to the floor.

The crowd surged forward and Rolly Truman stared at Buck as Hazlitt neared the stove. The big man stared into the flames for a minute, then he closed the door.

FOLLOW THE ADVENTURES OF THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS COWBOY IN

HOPALONG CASSIDY WESTERN MAGAZINE

FEATURING A NEW HOPALONG CASSIDY NOVEL EVERY ISSUE—ONLY 25c!

"Good!" he said. "Good thing! It's been a torment, that book, like a cloud hangin' over us all!"

The sun was shining through the window when Gail Truman came to see him. He was sitting up in bed, and feeling better. It would be good to be back on the place again, for there was much to do. She came in, slapping her boots with her quirt and smiling.

"Feel better?" she asked brightly. "You certainly look better. You've shaved."

He grinned and rubbed his jaw. "I needed it. Almost two weeks in this bed. I must have been hit bad."

"You lost a lot of blood. It's lucky you've a strong heart."

"It ain't—isn't so strong any more," he said, "I think it's grown mighty shaky here lately."

Gail blushed. "Oh? It has? Your nurse, I suppose?"

"She is pretty, isn't she?"

Gail looked up, alarmed. "You mean, you—"

"No, honey," he said, "you!"

"Oh." She looked at him, then looked down. "Well, I guess—"

"All right?"

She smiled then, suddenly and warmly. "All right."

"I had to ask you," he said. "We had to marry."

"Had to? Why?"

"People would talk, a young, lovely girl like you over at my place all the time—would they think you were looking at the view?

"If they did," she replied quickly, "they'd be wrong!"

"You're telling me?" he asked.

INDIAN COSTUMES

Back in Pioneer Days, They Were Not a Good Idea for White Men!

•

by SIMPSON M. RITTER

ACCORDING to Rudolph Kurz, the Swiss painter who spent several years during the early 1800s touring and sketching the West, it was mostly the phonies among the "mountain men" and hunters who dressed in spectacular Indian costume.

For one thing, the practice was a dangerous one. True mountainmen and hunters and scouts moved from place to place and were always encountering Indians. If their Indian costume was that of another tribe, they would at a distance be taken for a hostile Indian and arrowed to death at once.

Secondly, the Indians had a high regard for the clothes of the whites, which were more expensive, and which they regarded as far more fashionable and endeavored to imitate them when they couldn't buy. Therefore, a white man in Indian costume seemed to them one who had failed so miserably among his own people that he couldn't even buy suitable clothing.

Highly spectacular Indian type costumes were worn, wrote Kurz, for the most part by men who had merely grazed the far West and returned East to harvest laurels they had never won. It was these imitators of the true Western pioneers, he bemoans, who usually lectured on the West to Eastern populations and distorted facts either through ignorance or through a desire to impress themselves upon their audiences.

THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

in Europe and Julius Caesar's time back in the old Roman Empire and lots more. There was so much doing and there were so many terrific characters strutting about that even plain old dull history fairly crackles around these times.

The story of our American west is another time like those. Big doings, dramatic doings. And that's why so many writers find stories about this period and why readers love it.

Now when an author decides he's going to write about a certain period in the old days, he's got something of a problem. Should he go easy on the history, make it just a touch of frosting on the cake, and let his imagination run wild as to the actual story? You've seen stories like that—with Billy The Kid, or Wild Bill Hickok doing and saying things that they'd never have dreamed of doing in their real lifetimes. That's one way. The other is to stick close to history and make it heavy, but plumb authentic. And that kind of book sometimes loses too much in speed and movement.

Then there's a third way. And that is to tie down the historical events of the period pretty firmly, get a lot of research done as to customs and clothing and language and study the map as to towns and roads and distances and a million other little details; then invent your characters and turn them loose in plenty of adventure, so long as it doesn't contradict what actually did happen to the real characters who lived then.

A First Hand View

Probably that's the best way. For it turns out a fast, readable exciting story, it doesn't try to teach history—and it does something better. It gives the reader a first hand view of life in those days, how the people actually looked and lived and talked, and because it is checked and double-checked in details, he learns more than he would suspect about everything connected with the time.

Now we just happened to get hold of a story that fits right in with that kind of tough qualifications. This story is called BUGLES BEFORE DAWN and it was written by Gladwell Richardson, an Arizona boy who knows the southwest like a mother knows the face of her child.

This story's got a mite of surprise in it. You've heard how bad the Apaches and Comanches were, what tough, deadly fighters and how fearless and terrifying. And you've heard that by contrast the Navajos were peaceful folk. Well, author Richardson, in his endless research, came up with the information that the Navajos were peaceful—that they didn't enjoy war for its own sake like the Apaches—but that when they got going they were a much more dangerous enemy than either the Apaches or Comanches, because they were more intelligent, had better generals and were a heap more determined. The Navajos were harder to lick than their better known cousins.

A Navajo Campaign

BUGLES BEFORE DAWN is the story of a Navajo campaign. It takes place in New Mexico, during the last year of the Civil War—pahdon me, cousins below the Mason and Dixon—The War Between The States.

This is an intensely gripping story. You'll live in the saddle with the hard-bitten cavalry troopers, you'll stand the shock of charging Indian horsemen, you'll crawl on your belly up a pine-needled slope with carbine ahead, waiting for that first flicker of movement, the smash of a bullet, the blood-chilling scream of the war whoop. You'll be caught up in the excitement and thrill of a hard-fought battle where brains and bluff played as big a part as men and guns.

And then you'll find something unexpected. You'll find yourself unexpectedly, an expert on military tactics and stratagems and campaigns. You'll know a heap about Indian fighting and cavalry troops and the mountains of New Mexico that you never suspected. And all without a single history lesson. All because Richardson has put so much careful research into every event, every scene of this big, rich novel, that it is all exact and authentic—the way it could really have happened.

Gladwell Richardson has written over

forty fine western books. But your old Ramrod thinks that BUGLES BEFORE DAWN is, without question, the finest thing he has ever done. It's a story you'll want to keep, to read over again, and I'd sure risk a guess that next issue's GIANT WESTERN will go in your bookshelf to stay.

Walt Coburn Novelet

If BUGLES BEFORE DAWN was the only drawing card, we'd still be proud of our next issue. But to prove that good things don't always come alone, we've got another real treat, a good long novelet by Walt Coburn titled FEAR BRANDED.

Coburn doesn't need the Ramrod patting him on the back. You folks who love westerns know he's been tops in the field for a long time. And FEAR BRANDED is Coburn at his best.

This is the kind of story we bookish fellers call a saga—a heroic tale of the kind that leads to legends which grow and grow and make a living character out of a man generations after he's dead. It's the story of a boy whose mother runs off with a gambler and when he finds her again, she is dying; the gambler is mixed up in more deviltry which the youth's new life inevitably crosses. This story is dynamite—100 proof, and that should be enough for you Coburn fans.

Well, your old Ramrod's been gassing away here and filled up a heap of white

(Continued on page 140)

ALBUM OF AMERICA'S GREATEST COWBOYS!

CAPTAIN BOB PRYOR

The Far-Famed Rio Kid

Follow the adventures of this fighting man of the Frontier and his pards—in full-length action novels every issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN—at all stands!

JIM HATFIELD

The Ace of Texas Rangers

The most daring lawman of the Lone Star State rides every month in an exciting book-length novel by Jackson Cole which appears in TEXAS RANGERS Magazine, 20c!

STEVE REESE

Field Chief of the C.P.A.

Aided by Hank Ball and Dusty Trail, this Cattlemen's Protective Association sleuth rides the trouble trails of the West—in RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, 20c at all stands!

WAYNE MORGAN

Masked Rider of the Range

The mysterious Robin Hood outlaw and his Yaqui pard, Blue Hawk, come to the aid of the oppressed in exciting novels starred in MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 20c everywhere!

HOLD on to YOUR SCALP

By WILLIAM CARTER

Ever Try Playing "Stickball"?

IF you think football is rough, have a look sometime at the Indian game of stickball. This game, older than lacrosse, had been played by the Indians for hundreds of years before Columbus ever slickered Queen Isabella out of three little ships to go sailing across the Atlantic.

What makes stickball so rough—and so fascinating—is an almost complete absence of rules. There are ten men on each side. Each man carries a small, home-made racket. The idea is to get the ball over the opponents' goal line. You can get it there any way you like—throw it, kick it, pass it, or carry it in your mouth. If the ball touches the ground it must be picked up only with the rackets.

To stop the ball carrier, anything goes. You can tackle him, punch him, wrestle, bite or choke. Knives are not allowed. There are no periods in the game, no rests or time out, no time limit. The mayhem continues until one side has 12 goals, and that wins. It's a rare team that finishes with ten players, since a whack over the head or across the shins with the racket is enough to discourage even a tough Injun warrior if delivered with enthusiasm. If your side loses a player to the hospital, the other side has to give up one player, so most of these games tend to thin out after awhile.

Anytime you get bored with football, you might hunt up some Cherokees and ask for a game of stickball. You may be battered but you won't be bored.

LIMITED OFFER

6 IN 1 TOOL SET

$1.49

GET ALL SIX FOR THE PRICE OF ONE

1—Strong claw hammer with sure-grip knurled handle.
2—Nickel-plated pounding head securely locked into shaft.
3—5" screwdriver for husky duty on gas range, lawnmower, cars.
4—3" screwdriver for electrical, lock repair.
5—2" screwdriver for sewing machine, toaster, appliances.
6—1" screwdriver for eyeglasses, watch, radio.

A SET OF 6 FINE PRECISION TOOLS! This amazing 6-in-1 tool set gives you all the tools you need for hundreds of fix-it jobs . . . but all you buy . . . all you carry, is just ONE FEATHERWEIGHT HAMMER. Unscrew the handle, out pop four multi-purpose screwdrivers. Professional tools, but complete set only 8" long. Rustproof. Perfect balance. Ideal for home, camper, sportsman, hobbyist. Get yours now at sensational mail-order savings.

EXTRA With prompt orders, we will include without extra cost, an assortment of screws for every household use. Order today.

SEND NO MONEY! Try at Our Risk

Just send name and address. On arrival, pay postman only $1.49 plus C.O.D. postage. If not 100% delighted, return for full refund on purchase price. Save money! Send cash, we pay postage. Write today!

SENNE & COMPANY, 1665 N. Milwaukee Ave. Chicago 47, Ill. Dept. 104

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD! TRAIN FOR A FUTURE IN DIESEL

Prepare for the big earning power of Diesel Trained Men. Start learning at home, in spare time. UEI's easy, practical training covers all phases of DIESEL engine operation, fuel systems, auxiliary equipment, repairs and maintenance. Also new Scientific Auto Motor Tune-up. After home course, you come to Chicago for actual practice in UEI's modern shop under experienced instructors. GET ALL THE FACTS FREE. WRITE TODAY!

DIESEL DIVISION UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
2525 Sheffield Avenue, Dept. DR-6 Chicago 14, Illinois

NEW WRITERS NEEDED

EARN UP TO $5.00 AN HOUR, SPARE TIME

New writers needed to re-write ideas in newspapers, magazines, books. Splendid opportunity to "break into" fascinating writing field. May bring you up to $5.00 per hour, spare time. Experience unnecessary. Write for FREE details, and how to get FREE Writer's Market Guide!

COMFORT WRITER'S SERVICE
Dept. 2-TF 200 S. 7th St. St. Louis 2, Mo.

Saves Costly Redecorating

AMAZING INVENTION. Banishes old-style housecleaning mess and muss. No rags—no sticky "dough"—no red, swollen hands. No more dangerous stepladders. Literally erases dirt like magic from Wallpaper, Painted Walls, Ceilings, Window Shades. *Take orders from friends! Earn money!* Actnow!

SAMPLES FOR TRIAL Sample offer sent immediately to all who send name at once. A penny postal will do. SEND NO MONEY—*just your name,* KRISTEE CO., Dept. 1496, AKRON 8, OHIO

New FALSE PLATE for OLD IN 24 HOURS

Low As Only $16.00

***Wonderful New Scientific Method Transforms OLD, LOOSE, Cracked or Chipped Plates into* LUSTROUS BEAUTY-PINK DUPONT PLASTIC PLATES**

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

Why envy beautiful false teeth of others? We will transform your old, loose, cracked or chipped plate into a beautiful new, lightweight DuPont Beauty-Pink Plastic Plate, using your own teeth. All guessing and broken teeth matched and replaced. Your cost amazingly low; actually save many dollars. No impressions needed under our new scientific False Plate Method. 24-Hour Service. **SEND NO MONEY** Enjoy life again, and save money on beautiful, new, natural-looking plastic plate. Rush name, address for full details sent FREE. If your plate is loose, we show you how to make it comfortable, tight-fitting before duplication.

West Dental Laboratory, 127 N. Dearborn St., Dept. D-45, Chicago 2, Ill.

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. Specially prepared "Patent Guide" containing detailed information concerning patent protection and procedure with "Record of Invention" form will be forwarded to you upon request—without obligation.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON

Registered Patent Attorneys

18-A District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

LOOK for Rupture Help

Try a Brooks Patented Air Cushion appliance. This marvelous invention for most forms of reducible rupture is GUARANTEED to bring YOU heavenly comfort and security—day and night—at work and at play—or it costs you NOTHING! Thousands happy. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads or springs. For men, women, and children. Durable, cheap. **Sent on trial to prove it.** Not sold in stores. Beware of imitations. Write for Free Book on Rupture, no-risk trial order plan, and Proof of Results. Ready for you NOW!

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO., 183-J State St., Marshall, Mich.

Be a DETECTIVE

A CHALLENGE FROM WASHINGTON D.C.!

Help Stop Crime! Train at home. Earn big money. Amazing training course from the NATIONS CAPITOL (center of law enforcement) by former U.S. GOVT. AGENT and NAVAL INTELLIGENCE Officer exposes actual methods used by Criminals. Write for FREE BOOK. State age.

INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM

INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE TRAINING SCHOOL

1701 Monroe St., N.E. Dept. 192 Washington 18, D. C.

BE A *Nurse*

LEARN AT HOME

Practical nurses are needed in every community...doctors rely on them...patients appreciate their cheerful, expert care. You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. 52nd yr. Earn while learning. High School not required. Men, women. 18 to 60. Trial plan. Write now!

CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING

Dept. 422, 41 East Pearson Street, Chicago 11, Ill.

Please send free booklet, and 16 sample lesson pages.

*Name*_____

*City*_____ *State*_____ *Age*_____

THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 138)

space, so I'll just wind 'er up by telling you that you can expect some slick short stories for the rest of the issue, plus all the usual features and those snappy little shorties which dish out facts and figures about the cow country. All in all, a rare issue, we calculate. Be on hand, won't you-all?

THE MAIL BAG

WHAT we've been trying to do by inviting you folks to write in here was to get you to make some kind of check on the kind of stories you seem to enjoy the most. Now *we* may think a story is a smash hit, but what counts in the long run is what *you* think of it. So that's why we like you to tick them off for us; once we get a clue as to what you like or don't we can check our own aim at getting stories. Here's a prime sample:

I sure like GIANT WESTERN MAGAZINE. My favorite stories in the August issue were SHOWDOWN ON THE HOGBACK, DEAD MAN'S GOLD, STAGECOACH and the article, THE TAOS INDIAN.

Darryl Matter, Portis, Kansas.

That's the sort of stuff. If Darryl had any gripes and added them to the letter we'd want to know that too, but as long as he didn't we'll take the silence as meaning he liked the rest of the stories only a little less.

Now we have a dilemma from Mrs. Larry Logan who sends us a couple of clips from two short articles in the August issue which make contradictory statements about Billy The Kid. Says Mrs. Logan:

We are a bit confused as to whether Billy The Kid *was* so much loved by the Mexicans.

(Continued on page 142)

Best Romantic Stories of the West in Every Issue of—

RANCH ROMANCES

Now 148 Pages—25c at All Stands!

Lady Buffalo Hunter

A True Story of Kansas

By MARK KNIGHT

THE very masculine buffalo hunters of the 1840's had a rival in Seima MacKay. Perhaps because Seima was neither a beautiful nor friendly woman, she has been neglected by most historians.

Seima showed up in Kansas, along the Arkansas river, around 1839. To the question of her origin she'd point vaguely east and mutter "back there." She arrived on horseback, leading two pack mules and dressed like a man, though her proportions were obviously feminine. She carried an old horse pistol on her hip and a long rifle in the crook of her right arm.

She bedded down away from others and made no effort to get acquainted with either the handful of women in the territory or the few hundred men. She rose early each morning, mounted up and rode out toward the buffalo trails. Her marksmanship was good, the men hunters grudgingly admitted. On one occasion she brought down nine beasts during a one mile run that took about six minutes. The best male hunters boasted twelve and very rarely fourteen.

She knew how to strip a hide and how to dress and pack the meat. Hides and meat she took into town and offered to the regular merchants rather than to the hide dealers or provision buyers. Since she generally fetched in more than her grocery bill amounted to, she built up a substantial credit in a dozen different stores.

One day in 1842 she started visiting each of these merchants and demanding her due in cold cash. She gathered together more than $800, a fairly substantial sum for that day, and mounted on her horse, leading her two pack mules, she rode eastward and was never seen or heard of again.

You Make Money Fast
Every Time You Give a Show
with the Sensational New
TELEVISION BANK

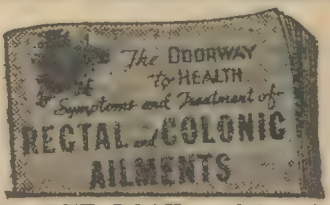
Make easy money every show!
This miniature T-V Bank looks like the big table models. Friends, relatives drop nickles, dimes, quarters to see the screen light up with different scenes. A flick of the knob tunes in cartoons, football, boxing, Western shots. Holds $200 and it's filled up before you know it!

SEND NO MONEY, Use 10 Days at Our Risk
Just send name and address. On arrival pay postman $2.49 plus C. O. D. If not delighted return for your money back. Save money! Send $2.49 and we pay all postage. Write today!

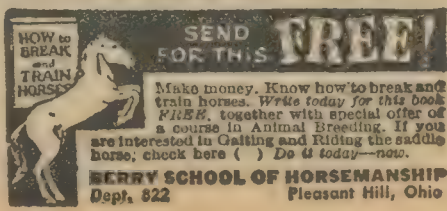
T-V BANK CO., Dept. V561-B
815 N. 7th St. St. Louis, Mo.

QUIT TOBACCO!
Remove all tobacco craving safe in every form and join the thousands who have completely obtained satisfactory freedom from tobacco with the old genuine TOBACCO BANISHER. Send for FREE BOOKLET describing the ill effects of tobacco, and a safe, reliable home treatment. A proven success for 39 years.
GUSTAF H. GUSTAFSON CO.
2325 E. Vickery Blvd. Dept. TF Ft. Worth 3, Texas

FREE BOOK—
On Chronic Ailments



40-page FREE BOOK explains the causes and effects of these ailments. Write today—Thornton & Minor Clinic, Suite 256, 911 E. Linwood, Kansas City 3, Mo.


HOW to BREAK and TRAIN HORSES
SEND FOR THIS FREE!
Make money. Know how to break and train horses. Write today for this book FREE, together with special offer of a course in Animal Breeding. If you are interested in Gaiting and Riding the saddle horse, check here ( ) Do it today—now.
BERRY SCHOOL OF HORSEMANSHIP
Dept. 822 Pleasant Hill, Ohio

NEW! AMAZING!
3-IN-1 LIGHTER COMBINATION
CIGARETTE LIGHTER
FLASHLIGHT
KEY CHAIN
ALL ONE UNIT
INTRODUCTORY OFFER ONLY $1.98
INITIAL IN GOLD AT NO EXTRA COST
NEW... IMPROVED...
For Men and Women!
Sensational 3-in-1 lighter combination. Cigarette lighter, flashlight and key chain. All in one unit. Lighter fits easily into case of case, yet pulls out easily to give a quick, sure light. Flashlight complete with battery. Beaded key chain fastens securely to top of unit. Beautiful plastic. Smart and streamlined. Fits easily in palm of hand. A wonderful convenience. The ideal gift. ADD YOUR INITIAL IN GOLD AT NO EXTRA COST. SEND NO MONEY—7-DAY TRIAL. ORDER TODAY. SUPPLY LIMITED. On arrival deposit only $1.98 plus C.O.D. postage. Use 7 days. If not delighted return for refund. (Send $1.98 and we pay postage.) Dealers: write for prices, discounts.
HENRY SENNE & CO., Dept. 105, 1665 N. Milwaukee Ave. Chicago 47, Illinois

TOOTHACHE?
"Since 1888"
Quick relief with Dent's. Use Dent's Tooth Gum or Dent's Tooth Drops for cavity toothaches. Use Dent's Dental Poultice for pain or soreness in gums or teeth. At all drug stores.
DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS DENTAL POULTICE

RUPTURED?
Get Relief This Proven Way
Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write:
Cluthe Sons, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey

BE A DETECTIVE
WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write GEO. T. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

"How to Make Money with Simple Cartoons"
A book everyone who likes to draw should have. It is free; no obligation. Simply address
FREE BOOK
CARTOONISTS' EXCHANGE
Dept. 72 Pleasant Hill, Ohio

THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 140)

One article says he felt himself a "superior being" and the Mexicans "fair game." How about clarifying this for us in one of your future issues?

My husband and I are both ardent fans of W. C. Tuttle. Cultus Collins is quite the hero, never lacking in interest in any of his adventures. Let's hear more about him.

Mrs. Larry Logan, Los Angeles, Calif.

Pards, Mrs. Logan has us dead center. In the article THE TAOS INDIAN, John Edward Dalton says Billy The Kid was beloved and protected by the Mexicans. And then Buck Benson makes that remark about Billy considering Mexicans fair game in the same issue.

I think the only possible explanation is this: So many stories and legends and yarns have grown up around Billy The Kid that it is becoming harder and harder to tell where the truth lies.

Billy The Kid may have hated Mexicans, but some admiring biographer, wanting to make the Kid look good and less like a cold-blooded killer, may have invented a yarn about the Mexicans loving him, which yarn might have been picked up and embroidered as it traveled until it made its way into a lot of the accepted histories of the West. Or the reverse may be true. Billy may have had kindly feelings toward Mexicans, but some other biographers wanting to make him look even more despicable might have made up a story that he considered Mexicans "fair game"—thus making him seem more like a wolf than a human.

Personally I think that some of both happened. Just as there are two schools of thought on Wild Bill Hickok—some defending him and digging up new stories all the time to prove what a wonderful man he was, and some despising him and always finding new stories to prove he was a coward and a liar and a back-

(Concluded on page 144)

SAVE
FOR YOUR INDEPENDENCE
BUY U. S. SAVINGS BONDS!

Gold Rush Law

Boom Time Justice in Frisco

By JOHN BLACK

ONE of the reason's San Francisco remained lawless, in effect if not in letter, for a long while during and immediately after the gold rush, was the type of officials ruling it. These for the most part were persons who had proven themselves useless and so were thrown on the town to get them out of the way of the money men. A striking example was one Meade, who held office as First Alcalde, mayor.

Meade was a man weighed down by superstitions and prejudices. His two outstanding fears were of Mexicans and of cigarette smokers. He was convinced that the latter group were all imps from Hell in disguise. On one occasion a Mexican farmer was hailed before him on charges of having stolen a horse. The only evidence against the man was his proximity to the scene of the crime.

The prosecutor was almost ready to give up when Meade, serving as his own magistrate, said. "I'll find out if this man is guilty or not."

"Do you smoke cigarettes?" he asked the defendent.

"Si, senor."

"And do you blow the smoke out through your nose?"

"Si, senor," again responded the puzzled Mexican.

"Then it is evident," remarked Meade to the court, "that he must be the thief." He turned to the accused man. "I find you guilty as charged on your own admission. Constable, take this Mexican outside and shoot him!"

LEARN Television -Radio OR Electricity IN THE GREAT SHOPS OF COYNE

COYNE 52nd YEAR

TRAIN QUICKLY! OLDEST, BEST EQUIPPED SCHOOL of ITS KIND in U.S.

Student Finance Plan

Come to the Great Shops of COYNE in Chicago. Our 52nd Year! Get quick, practical training in TELEVISION-RADIO or ELECTRICITY. G I Approved Finance plan for non-veterans. Mail Coupon Today for complete details.

NOT "HOME-STUDY" COURSES!

You learn on real, full-size equipment, not by mail. Finest staff of trained instructors to help you get ready quickly for a better job, a fine future.

FREE BOOK Clip coupon for big illustrated Coyne book. Check whether interested in one or both opportunity fields. No obligation; no salesman will call. Act NOW!

Coyne—An Institution not for Profit

B. W. COOKE, Pres.
COYNE Electrical & Television-Radio School,
500 S. Paulina St., Chicago 12, Ill. Dept. 11-84K
Send FREE BOOK and full details on:
☐ TELEVISION-RADIO ☐ ELECTRICITY
NAME.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY STATE

TAKE HIGH SCHOOL AT HOME

YOU NEED A DIPLOMA

...to get a better job or more rapid promotions! C.T.I. guided study method helps you earn yours in *months*. Equals resident work. Saves time. *Texts supplied.* College prep. Credit for work elsewhere. Easy terms. *Write for valuable free booklet today!*

COMMERCIAL TRADES INSTITUTE
1400 Greenleaf Ave. Dept. H 16-2 Chicago 26

AGENTS — BIG MONEY in GLASSES

AMAZING NEW DEVICE TESTS EYES AT HOME! Save up to $15. Satisfaction guaranteed. Send for FREE SAMPLE KIT, take orders, make big, fast profits, in a new field. Virgin territory. Spare or full time. No experience or capital needed. Write today!

CLARK OPTICAL CO., Dept. A-227, 1148 W. Chicago Ave., Chicago 22, Ill.

Learn BAKING At Home

Baking is one of America's high industries in wages. Nearly depression-proof. Thorough basic home course lays sound foundation. If you have aptitude, write for FREE BOOKLET, "Opportunities in Commercial Baking."
National Baking School, 1315 Mich. Ave., Dept. 1802, Chicago 5

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years
Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.
AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. H-258 Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

Learn here the TRUTH about
PSORIASIS
IS IT A SKIN DISEASE OR INTERNAL?

For the past several years a number of Physicians have reported amazing success in treating Psoriasis with LIPAN —a new medical wonder taken *internally*. LIPAN (registered U. S. Patent Office) is a combination of glandular substances that treat certain internal disorders which many medical men now agree to be the cause of Psoriasis. Clinical results show LIPAN successful in over 90% of the cases treated. Even stubborn lesions are alleviated to a degree almost beyond belief. *Absolutely harmless!* Ask your druggist for LIPAN, or write direct for free booklet. Or send for month's supply (180 tablets), enclosing check or money order for $8.50.
SPIRT & COMPANY, Dept. TF-21, Waterbury, Conn.

SEE *the World in Pictures*
IN
SEE
America's Favorite Picture Magazine
NOW ON SALE—ONLY 15c AT ALL STANDS!

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946, of Giant Western, published bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass., for October 1, 1950. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Best Publications, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Editor, None. Managing editor, None. Business manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. The owner is: Best Publications, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y., N. L. Pines, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. H. L. Herbert. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1950. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. (My commission expires March 30, 1952).

THE TALLY BOOK

(Concluded from page 142)

shooter. The same thing happened with Billy The Kid. And our two authors, Buck Benson and John Edward Dalton, got their dope from different sources.

You'll find this is true of many of the legends about the West. I think we've discussed it before in this space. It's one of the things that makes the whole business so interesting.

LAST OF THE LONG S by Walt Coburn was tops, but it would be hard to choose between that and NO LAW IN PASS CREEK VALLEY, by Wayne D. Overholser in the December issue. STAGECOACH, by Arch Whitehouse in the August number was swell and I nearly sprung a rib howling at SOMETHING IN A NAME by Francis Ames. He writes the Sandstone stories in WEST, your companion magazine, doesn't he? KINGPIN OF THE ROCKIES, by Dixon Wells was a good slant on little-known people who made the West.

Frank Pilsbury, Oil City, Pa.

Nice letter, Frank. Seeing as how you picked a lot of our own favorites we can't help liking you for it.

Folks, you'll all be helpful if you'd take a minute or two to jot down the stories you liked or didn't like in any issue of GIANT WESTERN. Just address a card or letter to The Ramrod, GIANT WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Be mighty proud to hear from you. Thanks, everybody, and so long for now.

—THE RAMROD.

Answers to Questions from Page 107

1. The flash from a bright object could be seen for miles on the plains and would be a tip-off to a prospective enemy. Even white shirts and handkerchiefs were avoided.

2. A cow by far. A bull shuts his eyes when charging, a cow keeps her eyes open and is lightning quick to hook a dodging man.

3. This was an old gag in cow country. Actually, the color of a horse had nothing to do with his bucking ability or his temperament.

4. White men could wear moccasins, but white men toed out and Indians always toed in.

5. Rarely. Westerners had so much prejudice against "butting into" other people's affairs that they would almost never offer help unless their own horses or cattle were involved. They wouldn't even warn a bank that a holdup was being planned. Strange but true.

Women in Rodeo

Risks Are Out for the Ladies!

By BESS RITTER

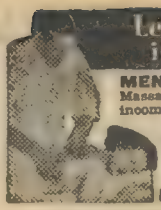
MORE than 750 different rodeo units tour the country each year. Several of them go abroad. Of the approximately 10,000 show persons attached to these rodeos, less than 1,000 are women.

Modern girl rodeoists are no longer permitted to participate in such dangerous activities as throwing a bull, bronco busting, or roping a wild steer as they did in the days of Prairie Rose back around 1910. A few years back a girl performer was gored to death. Since then exhibitors have been strict.

The ladies now confine themselves for the most part to trick riding. They do somersaults, backflips, etc., on horseback. About the worst that happens to them now is losing their britches, as did Norma Shoulders one season at the Madison Square Garden show. Norma was standing in her saddle flourishing a baton with marked agility when a defective zipper went all to pieces.

Most of the girl riders are married and generally their husbands are fellow performers in the same unit.

Girl performers are best paid in the East where the least is expected of them. For a riding feat considered simple in the profession they can sometimes earn $100 per performance. Back in the home territory they must really prove their mettle to a knowing audience and fees rarely run much over $25 per show.



Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 60. Many Swedish Massage graduates make big money! Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. Prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE!

The College of Swedish Massage
Dept. 1638 41 E. Pearson, Chicago 11

FREE—Amazing Book on
RHEUMATISM, ARTHRITIS

If you suffer the aches, pains and discomforts of Rheumatism, as manifested in ARTHRITIS, NEURITIS, SCIATICA or LUMBAGO, send today for the FREE Book. It reveals important facts about why drugs and medicine give only temporary relief without removing causes. Explains fully a proven, specialized system of treatment that may save you years of distress. No obligation. Write for this FREE Book today!

BALL CLINIC, Dept. 504, Excelsior Springs, Mo.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

In Business Since 1909
300,000 Satisfied Customers
THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

FREE BOOK

AMAZING COMFORT — NO SPECIAL FITTING

RUPTURE-EASER

For MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN

Right or Left Side $3.95

Pat. Pend. Double $4.95

A strong, form fitting washable support. Back lacing adjustable. Snaps up in front. Adjustable leg strap. Soft, flat groin pad. No steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort. Also used as after operation support. Mail orders give measure around the lowest part of the abdomen. Specify right or left side or double. We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s.

Over 200,000 Satisfied Users!
10 Day Trial Offer
Money-back guarantee if you don't get blessed relief
Delay may be serious — ORDER TODAY!
PIPER BRACE CO.
309 E. 12th Dept. TF-251 Kansas City 6, Mo.

CARBURETOR TOO RICH
MAKES MOTORIST TOO POOR

Car owners who are wasting money and not getting proper gas mileage due to over-rich mixtures will be pleased to learn how to save gasoline by VACU-MATING over-rich mixtures. VACU-MATIC fits all cars, trucks and tractors. It is *automatic* and operates on the supercharge principle. Easily installed in a few minutes.

SALESMEN WANTED! Big Profits! Send name, address on penny postcard for *free particulars* and how to get yours for introducing.

VACU-MATIC CO., 7612-1680 W. State St., WAUWATOSA, WIS.

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY

who never thought they could!

Thrilled by Playing

I've had my lessons just a week. I think your course is super. I was more thrilled than words can express when I found I could actually play America, The Merry Widow Waltz and the others.
*J. T., Mancelona, Mich.

Wouldn't Take $1000 for Course

The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course. *S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.

Shares Course With Sister

The teaching is so interesting and the pieces so beautiful I couldn't ask for anything better. I recommend your course highly. My sister shares it with me and feels the same way.
*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.

Finding New Joy

I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before, for I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.
*C. S. Lucien, Okla.

Plays After 2 Months

I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.
*E. T., Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

You, too, can play any instrument By this EASY A-B-C Method

YOU think it's difficult to learn music? That's what thousands of others have thought! Just like you, they long to play some instrument—the piano, violin, guitar, saxophone or other favorites. But they denied themselves the pleasure—because they thought it took months and years of tedious study to learn.

Learn in Spare Time at Home

And then they made an amazing discovery! They learned about a wonderful way to learn music at home—without a private teacher—without tedious study—and in a surprisingly short time. They wrote to the U. S. School of Music for the facts about this remarkable short-cut method. And the facts opened their eyes! They were amazed to find how easy it was to learn.

The result? Over 850,000 men and women have studied music at home this simple, A-B-C way. Now, all over the world, enthusiastic music-lovers are enjoying the thrilling satisfaction of creating their own music. They have found the key to good times, popularity and profit.

Costs only few cents a Day

And that's what you can do, right now. Get the proof that you, too, can learn to play your favorite instrument—quickly, easily, in spare time at home for only a few cents a day. Never mind if you have no musical knowledge or talent. Just read the fascinating booklet and Print and Picture sample that explain all about the U. S. School method. (Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit.) Tear out the coupon now, before you turn the page. U. S. School of Music, 2942 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y. (51st year)

FREE!

Print and Picture Sample

NOTICE

Prices of our courses have not gone up. Music lessons still cost only a few cents a day. Remember, we don't teach music "by ear" or by numbers. We teach you to play by standard notes.

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC,
2942 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y.

I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument checked below. Please send me your free illustrated booklet "How to Learn Music at Home," and your free Print and Picture Sample.

Piano	Saxophone	Clarinet	Practical Finger Control
Guitar	Trumpet, Cornet	Trombone	
Hawaiian Guitar	Reed Organ	Flute	
Violin	Tenor Banjo	Modern Elementary Harmony	Piccolo
Piano Accordion	Ukulele		Mandolin

Mr.
Miss
Mrs. (Please print)

Have you Instrument?

Address

City State

NOTE: If you are under 16 years of age, parent must sign coupon.

SAVE 2c—STICK COUPON ON PENNY POSTCARD

Build a Fine Business . . . FULL or SPARE TIME!

Sell MASON LEATHER JACKETS

EVERY OUTDOOR WORKER A PROSPECT!

Get Started Right! *Don't Invest a Cent!*

CASH PAY EVERY DAY WITH THIS DIRECT-FACTORY LINE!

Start your big business backed by this 47-year-old, million-dollar company. Make money from the first hour, taking orders for fast-selling, customer-satisfying outdoor garments! You just walk in, take your order, collect liberal advance profit, and go on to the next eager customer! You get FREE SELLING OUTFIT — everything you need to start cashing in on your first call.

The Garment Men WANT . . . and WILL BUY!

Smooth, gleaming, satin-twill defies winter blasts! Big, luxurious fur collar, WATER CAN'T HURT IT! Just ZIP-OFF Laskin Lamb collar for warm weather, makes two coats out of one! Easy to put collar on, take it off, with smooth-acting zipper.

WITH NYLON!*

Sturdy, handsome 33" long coat almost "wear-out proof" because it is 1/5 NYLON!* Warm, snug Intercel quilted lining, knitted wrist bands, keep you warm on coldest days!

ALSO SELL

EXCLUSIVE Velvet-eez AIR-CUSHIONED SHOES for MEN AND WOMEN

Make plenty of extra money with popular, fast selling full leather lined Chukka Boot and scores of other fine footwear styles with this wonderful Velvet-eez comfort feature! Cradles feet on thousands of tiny air bubbles, rests feet while you work or stand. Over 150 different styles for men, women, with Velvet-eez and other comfort, and style features. Full line of sport, work and dress shoes. Make extra money with smart line of shirts, raincoats, sport jackets.

FREE OUTFIT HELPS YOU CLINCH EASY SALES

"I have had many experiences where I have sold as many as 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 pairs in one sitting. I received a phone call from one party, who wanted 2 pairs of shoes. I went to his store and made 7 sales."

HARRY R. WILLIAMSON

National Advertising Opens Door for You

Big, powerful ads in Good Housekeeping and other national magazines make you known to people as the Mason Certified Shoe Fitter. You get the benefit — we pay the BILLS!

Good Housekeeping Seal Clinches Sales for You

Mason's VELVET-EEZ shoes awarded the Good Housekeeping Seal. This Seal ends hesitation. Helps you sell more customers more items. You make more money when you handle this great Line and enjoy the support of the institution people depend on for Guaranteed Satisfaction.

Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

GET FREE OUTFIT

RUSH THE COUPON TODAY!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-660, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

Show me how I can get started in my own business, full or spare time, selling your exclusive Velvet-eez and other shoe styles in my community. Please rush FREE SELLING OUTFIT to me right away. Send everything free and postpaid. My own shoe size is: .....

Name.....

Address.....

City.....

State.....

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.

Dept. M-660, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Be Protected in case of SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

HERE'S AN AMAZING NEW HOSPITALIZATION PLAN

NO TIME LIMIT
ON HOSPITAL ROOM AND BOARD
Policy Pays as Long as You Stay!

MAIL COUPON BELOW

Accidental Death and POLIO COVERAGE INCLUDED!

COSTS ONLY 3¢ A DAY

Individual or Family Eligible . . . Birth to Age 70

This is it! Sold only by mail! America's newest and greatest Hospitalization Plan. Amazing coverage! Lower cost! Good anywhere in the U.S. It's exactly what you need!

If you get sick or have an accident, you may go to any recognized Hospital (Rest Homes, Sanitariums, Government Hospitals excluded). Your NORTH AMERICAN Policy will pay for Hospital Room, Board and General Nursing Care at the rate of **$150.00** PER MONTH. What's more, you can stay as long as necessary. There's NO TIME LIMIT. Now, in case you need SURGERY, due to sickness, accident or disease . . . the Policy pays lump CASH for 74 specific SURGICAL OPERATIONS. What a help . . . what a blessing it is to fall back on this kind of coverage in time of need.

LOOK WHAT ELSE YOU GET!

For ACCIDENTAL DEATH Policy pays **$500.00** . . . with a special provision giving 4 times the amount — or **$2,000.00** — for death resulting from accident while traveling on a common carrier. But this isn't all. For still more protection, seldom included in ordinary Hospitalization — you and insured family members also get POLIO coverage — **$500.00** to cover HOSPITAL BILLS, **$500.00** for MEDICAL TREATMENT, **$500.00** for ORTHOPEDIC APPLIANCES.

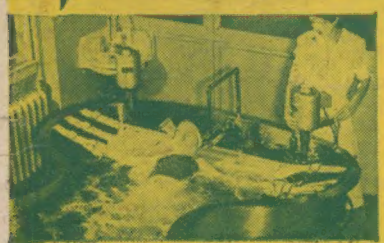
Then, too, there are liberal Benefits for accidental LOSS OF HANDS, FEET OR EYES; Benefits for EMERGENCY HOSPITAL TREATMENT for accidents involving no confinement, etc. Imagine all this wonderful value and coverage at a rate for adults of only about 3¢ a day, 1½¢ a day for children to age 18 . . . and CHILDREN GET FULL BENEFITS. (Maternity Rider is available at small additional charge.)

IMPORTANT. — The NORTH AMERICAN POLICY pays you FULL BENEFITS regardless of money you collect from other insurance sources for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. WE PAY DIRECT TO YOU! This means, if you are already carrying Hospitalization — be smart . . . buy this additional Policy, with its extra cash benefits, to protect yourself against today's higher Hospital costs. Don't Delay! MAIL COUPON BELOW for FREE DETAILS. No Agent will call!

SICKNESS OR ACCIDENT

SPECIFIC SURGICAL BENEFITS

LOSS OF HANDS, EYES, FEET



INFANTILE PARALYSIS BENEFITS

FREE! MAIL THIS COUPON

Truly this is a remarkable Hospitalization Plan. Investigate it! Buy it! Mail coupon for complete details.

No obligation. No agent will call.

North American Mutual INSURANCE COMPANY

Dept. 251—TG, North American Building, Wilmington 99, Delaware

Please send me without obligation full details about the new North American Hospitalization Plan. No Agent will call.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

(Paste on penny postcard or mail in envelope)

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW AND COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE
GIANT WESTERN
FEB. 1951

SCAN COURTSEY OF
EXCITER